OLD!

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CLASSIC GAMES

retro GAMER

AMSTRAD | COMMODORE | SEGA | NINTENDO | ATARI | SINCLAIR | NEO-GEO | SONY | COIN-OP | MOBILE

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HOW LUCASARTS USED THE FORCE TO CREATE THE SNES SMASH HIT

REVISTING TECMO'S GEMINI WING

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THE HISTORY OF THE SIMS

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YU SUZUKI CHARTS THE FASCINATING JOURNEY OF RYO HAZUKI FROM HIS SATURN ORIGINS TO HIS LATEST ADVENTURE

BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE NIGHT

DOES IGA'S HOMAGE TO HIS PAST CLASSICS LIVE UP TO THE HYPE?

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THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE MEGA DRIVE SHMUP?

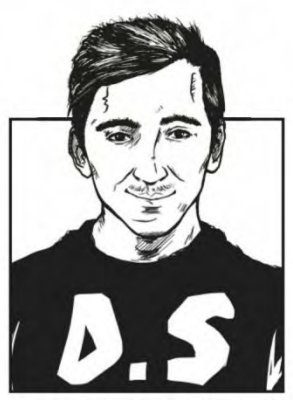
DARRAN JONES

Thunder Force III for me. Great level design, enormous bosses to take down and a wonderfully diverse soundtrack. It's the best in the series by far.

Expertise:
Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine

Currently playing:
The End Is Nigh

Favourite game of all time:
Strider



DREW SLEEP

Shoot-'em-ups are all the same to me. That said, *Zero Wing* is memorable to me for its excellent localisation!

Expertise:
"Does it spark joy?"

Currently playing:
Final Fantasy XIV

Favourite game of all time:
Final Fantasy VIII

NICK THORPE

I'm really partial to *Hellfire* – I love the way the game is designed around the different directional shots you can select.

Expertise:
Owning five *Master Systems* (I sold two)

Currently playing:
Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night

Favourite game of all time:
Sonic The Hedgehog

ANDY SALTER

It's either *Sol-Feace* or *Hellfire*, so I'll go with *Sol-Feace* because Nick took the latter from me.

Expertise:
Modding games, I rarely play a game in it's 'vanilla' form anymore

Currently playing:
Kenshi

Favourite game of all time:
Rome: Total War

PAUL WALKER-EMIG

I'm a big fan of *Ranger-X*. What really caught my attention was the impressive visuals, the awesome special weapons and the memorable boss battles.

Expertise:
Pretentious indie games

Currently playing:
Football Manager 2019

Favourite game of all time:
Metal Gear Solid

DAVID CROOKES

Thunder Force IV was the pinnacle of a series that had already proven to be a revolutionary blast, on the graphics front at least.

Expertise:
Amstrad, Lynx, adventures, Dizzy and PlayStation (but is it retro? Debate!)

Currently playing:
Loads of games on Antstream

Favourite game of all time:
Broken Sword

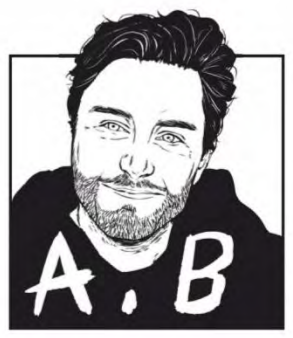
PAUL DRURY

The brutal and beautiful *Thunder Force IV*. Thanks to Matthew Taylor for introducing me to its sadistic charms all those years ago.

Expertise:
The third elevator screen

Currently playing:
Incredible Crisis

Favourite game of all time:
Sheep In Space



ADAM BARNES

I never had the patience to get any good at the range of shooters on Mega Drive, but *Space Harrier II* did everything right to draw me in. The music, the fake 3D, the weird sci-fi enemies: awesome.

Expertise:
Being pretentious about coffee

Currently playing:
The Sims

Favourite game of all time:
Baldur's Gate

RORY MILNE

I can't look past Treasure's *Alien Soldier*. I know it's not a pure shooter, but I love its intense boss fights, quirkiness and arcade vibe.

Expertise:
The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing

Currently playing:
Astroclone

Favourite game of all time:
Tempest

'll never forget my first experience with *Shenmue*. I had hungrily read every scrap of information that had come out about Sega's new game, mainly because it was the work of Yu Suzuki. I'd grown up with his games during the Eighties and early Nineties and reading about his plans for Ryo Hazuki had me tremendously excited. The 'FREE' system sounded like incredible, while it was already a given that *Shenmue*'s combat mechanics were going to be satisfying as hell.

When I finally played the highly anticipated game, it lived up to all my expectations – at least for the first hour or so. It soon became obvious that Suzuki and his team had perhaps bitten off a little more than they could chew, as the interaction that was possible while exploring Ryo's house was tempered the further you explored the game's world. And yet it didn't really matter for many because that world felt so real, so tangible. The lengths that Yu Suzuki and his team went to in order to create a believable game environment really is extraordinary, and it's easy to see how *Shenmue* has built up such a passionate fanbase in the intervening years. It's a real honour, then, to speak to the man himself about his ambitious game and to examine its Saturn origins as well as what the team has cooked up for the incoming *Shenmue III*.

Enjoy the magazine!

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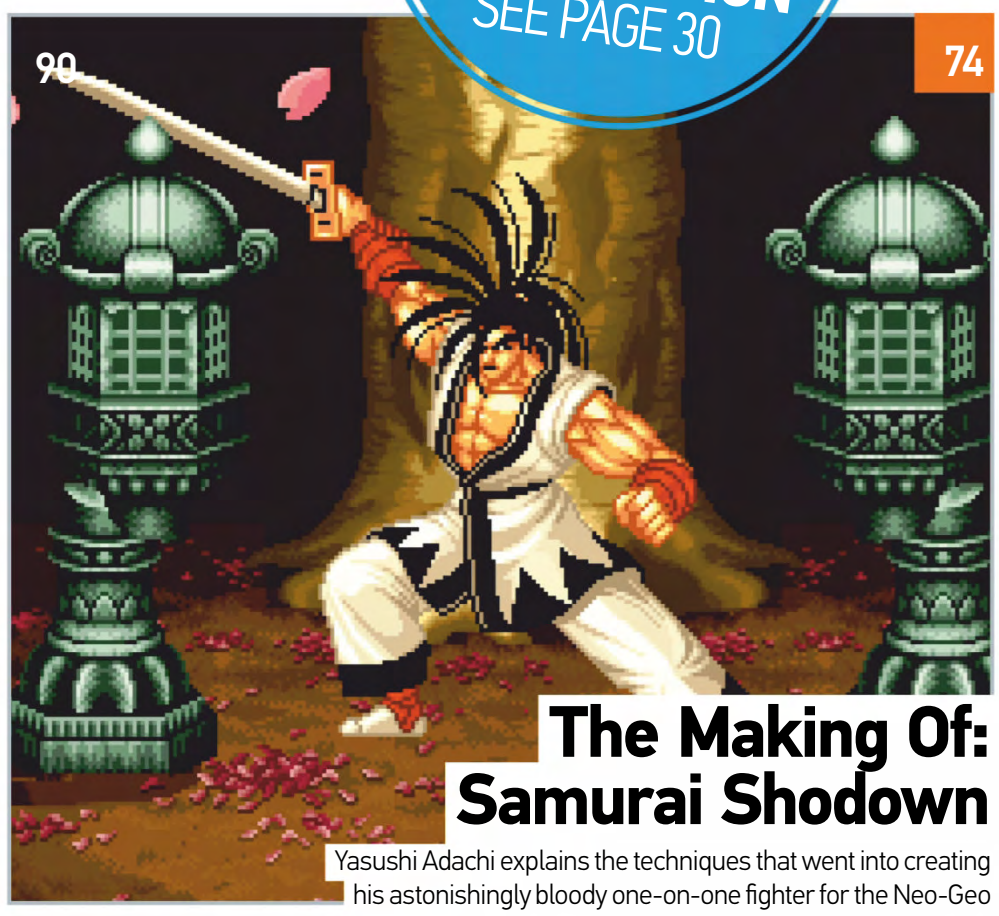

The Making Of: Samurai Shodown

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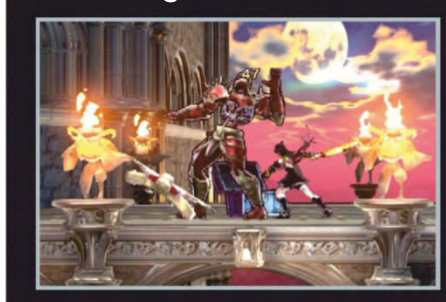

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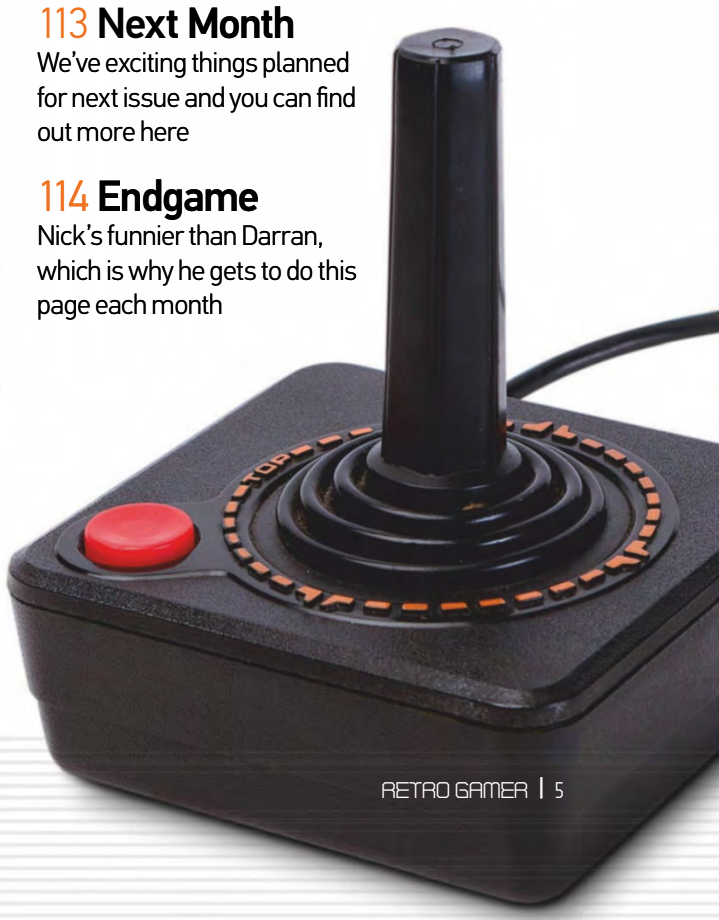

A RETURN TO THE FORGOTTEN REALMS

Luke Rideout on updating Dungeons & Dragons classics for modern consoles

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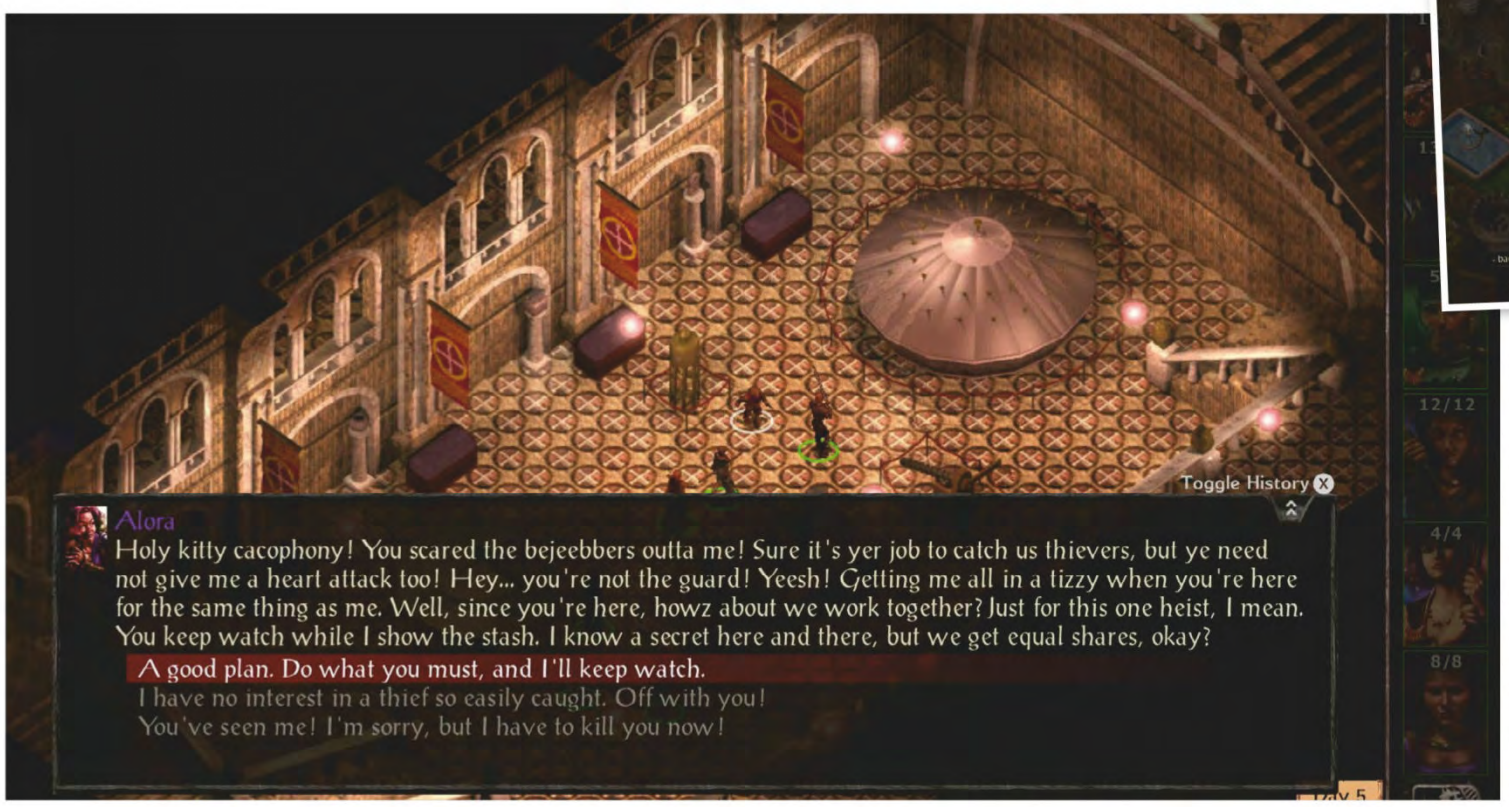
Nick is off on another journey through time. His destination: September 2002

With BioWare's Infinity engine games representing the pinnacle of RPG gaming for many fans, the recent news that developer Beamdog, in league with Skybound Games, will be releasing its enhanced editions on the PlayStation 4, Xbox One and Nintendo Switch has been met with much excitement. Having already brought its updates to a variety of platforms (including PC and iOS), these new versions will bring famous names such as *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape Torment* to an even wider audience. "For a long time we assumed these classic computer games just wouldn't work on console at all," reveals Luke Rideout, producer and project director at Beamdog. "But we started to explore the possibility, we built a prototype and we realised it was not only possible, but it was also fun to play!" There are three packs planned: *Baldur's Gate* plus its sequel, *Shadows Of Amn*, plus their respective expansions; the original *Neverwinter Nights* plus expansions, and a double pack of the brilliant *Planescape Torment*, together with the snowy dungeon-crawler, *Icewind Dale*.

» [PS4] Taking on a pack of Yetis in the chilly *Icewind Dale*.

While the games will not be specifically enhanced for 4K play on PS4 and Xbox One, all of the updates, fixes and additions from the current enhanced editions will be included, along with some pathfinding and user experience fixes, plus a fully redesigned interface, optimised for controller gameplay. "We have implemented an analogue control mode that allows you to directly control the movement of your party in formation," continues Luke. "To compliment this, we have improved highlighting of interactive objects and have a system that snaps the cursor to important objects, characters and transition points." With an interchangeable virtual mouse mode to assist in precise targeting and a consolidation of HUD shortcuts into radial menus, Beamdog is confident that control of the games will be as intuitive to console gamers as they are to PC and mobile phone users. "It was an enormous task to overhaul the classic point-and-click in favour of a new scheme that is conducive to controller play," notes Luke. "So it is satisfying to see such great results – but it was a journey." With *Baldur's Gate*, *Icewind Dale* and *Planescape Torment* sharing a common engine code, development changes across one project generally paid dividends across the others. The exception has been *Neverwinter Nights*, originally built using the Aurora engine, therefore a project developed entirely on its own, given its sequel is not included. "Unfortunately *Neverwinter Nights 2* isn't part of the library of games that Beamdog has access to," says Luke. "It wouldn't be completely out of the question in the future, but with the others, we had already laid the groundwork enabling us to build these new console games."

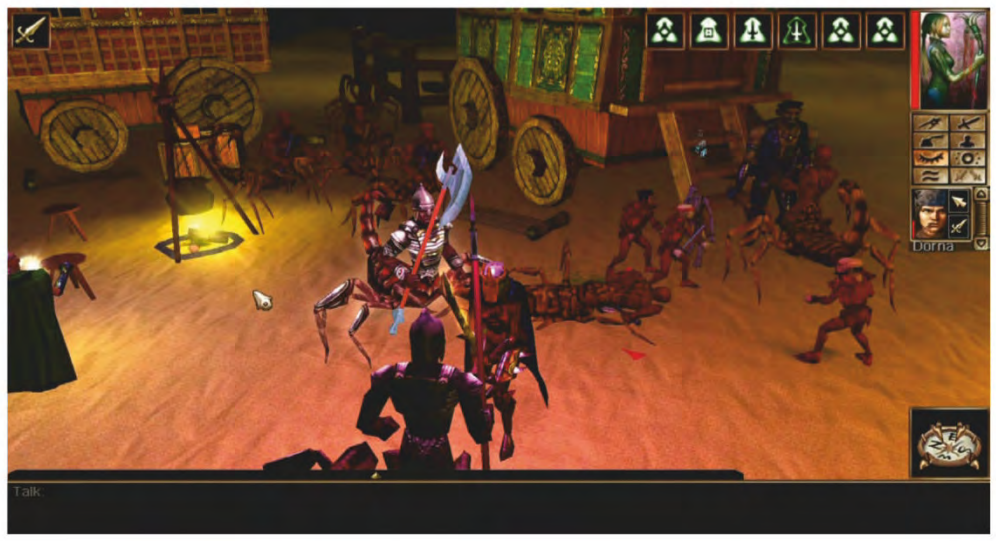
Both the *Baldur's Gate* and *Icewind Dale*/*Planescape Torment* packs will be released entirely on game disc, with a


Toggle History X
Alora
Holy kitty cacophony! You scared the bejeebbers outta me! Sure it's yer job to catch us thievers, but ye need not give me a heart attack too! Hey... you're not the guard! Yeesh! Getting me all in a tizzy when you're here for the same thing as me. Well, since you're here, howz about we work together? Just for this one heist, I mean. You keep watch while I show the stash. I know a secret here and there, but we get equal shares, okay?
A good plan. Do what you must, and I'll keep watch.
I have no interest in a thief so easily caught. Off with you!
You've seen me! I'm sorry, but I have to kill you now!

» [PS4] To catch a thief in the original *Baldur's Gate*.

"It is satisfying to see such great results – but it was a journey"

single launcher menu. "Both Skybound and Beamdog want players to enjoy the games right out of the box, instead of having to download gigabytes of game data to play," divulges Luke, something that we solidly approve of. By keeping the *Baldur's Gate* games to one physical package, data and characters can be saved and shared much more easily between the original, its sequel and the various expansions. With over 100 hours of gameplay, whatever the game pack, there's a lot for gamers to get their +3 Sword Of Sundering into; yet apart from the traditional RPG elements, what do these games have to offer to a modern audience? "Aside from the nostalgia and being part of the iconic *Dungeons & Dragons* universe, these games have staying power because they have rich, character-driven stories," explains Luke, and given there are few peers to these legendary series, we would tend to agree. And to help scratch the itch of 20-year *Baldur's Gate* veterans everywhere, Beamdog and Skybound are putting together some very lovely looking special collectors packs, which are also designed to lure in new fans wanting that authentic *Dungeons & Dragons* experience. "That led us to decide on some quintessential *Dungeons & Dragons* goods, like awesome metal dice and the Beholder dice bowl; our beautifully hand-drawn, weathered parchment-style map, as well as the hero cards and lithograph prints of fan-favourite characters like Minsc (and Boo), the Nameless One, Deekin and Aribeth."



» [Xbox One] This creature offers up a sting in the tail for our band of adventurers.

» [PS4] Stumbling upon a fan favourite monster, a Beholder, in *Neverwinter Nights*

Creating the *D&D* enhanced editions has been a huge labour of love for Beamdog, and now finally console owners can share in that love. With most fans overjoyed at seeing their retro RPG favourites resurrected once more, **Retro Gamer** is intrigued to see how the games translate to the Xbox One, PlayStation 4 and Nintendo Switch, especially with the latter looking like it will sadly lack touchscreen controls. Nevertheless, with a pre-existing rich stream of evocative storytelling, coupled with compelling gameplay, we are sure we can expect mountains of camaraderie, adventure and steel on steel. The stuff of legend! Right, Boo?

THE COLLECTIONS

BALDUR'S GATE & BALDUR'S GATE II: SHADOWS OF AMN

Released 21 years ago, the original *Baldur's Gate*, set in *D&D*'s Forgotten Realms, revolutionised the RPG genre and weighed heavy on CD drives everywhere with its hefty five discs. Expansion *Tales Of The Sword Coast* followed, before *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows Of Amn* arrived to even greater acclaim two years later. It also has an expansion, *Throne Of Bhaal*, which concludes the series.

PLANESCAPE TORMENT & ICEWIND DALE

Needing a project between the two *Baldur's Gate* games, BioWare created dungeon-crawler *Icewind Dale* in 2000, featuring a mildly upgraded Infinity engine and a pure hack-and-slash aesthetic. Also in this pack is *Planescape Torment*, a wonderful story-driven adventure that is often hailed as one of the greatest videogames of all time.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS

Despite its troubled development and publishing history, *Neverwinter Nights* arrived in 2002 using an advanced engine entitled Aurora and based upon the newer Third Edition *Dungeons & Dragons* rules. Featuring many enhanced graphical capabilities and more story-driven gameplay, it was another hit for BioWare, together with a further three expansion packs.

FEELING THE FORCE

JOSH FAIRHURST ON REVISITING LUCASARTS CLASSICS

If you're a collector of physical media you'll likely already be well aware of Limited Run Games. The US-based company specialises in creating physical releases for digital-only games and has come an incredibly long way since launching *Breach & Clear* on the PS Vita in 2015.

While it's no stranger to re-releasing retro classics this year's E3 saw the company announcing a string of Lucasfilm hits, including a large number of *Star Wars* games.

"Retro re-releases are something we've wanted to do for a very long time," admits Josh Fairhurst, one of Limited Run Games' co-owners. "We've been discussing it internally for years at this point and the Lucasfilm partnership provided us with the right opportunity to finally do it. They [LucasArts] reached out to us shortly before E3 2018 to see if we had any interest in working with them to create fan-focused physical re-releases for their back catalogue titles. I didn't even hesitate to jump on the opportunity."

» [SNES] Although the SNES *Super Star Wars* trilogy wasn't in Limited Run's original announcement, Josh is hopeful they could happen.

It's already re-released a PS4 version of *Bounty Hunter* as well as older classics, such as *Star Wars*, which has been re-released as both a NES and Game Boy cartridge, but has additional games planned as well. As is typical of Limited Run Games the special editions really do help them to stand out. "Each of our *Star Wars* releases will be a separate release," continues Josh. "Our overall goal was to create consistent, cohesive, and cool packaging for each game that would make these shine on a shelf. I own all of the older *Star Wars* PC big boxes and they come in so many differently sized boxes with vastly different art – they just don't display super great. We're creating something that is going to look killer on fans' shelves when all is said and done!"

Star Wars titles aren't the only LucasArts classics that will be unearthed by Josh's team. "We'll be releasing physical collector boxes for the first three *Monkey Island* games alongside the announced *Star Wars* games," continues Josh. "One thing that I think is pretty cool is that we'll be re-releasing the Sega CD version in a proper long-box jewel case for the first time. This probably isn't significant for anyone outside of the US, but the game came out here in this real flimsy box. It's going to be real satisfying to put a proper jewel case version of the game up on my shelf!"

Josh is a collector himself (check out his collection in an upcoming issue) so he's well aware of the excitement generated by companies like Limited Run Games. "I'm really obsessed with nostalgia and the things I enjoyed growing up – so retro remasters and remakes appeal to me very deeply."

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» Many Limited Run Games are only on sale for a limited time, so you need to be quick to avoid disappointment.

» The first few *Star Wars* releases have done extremely well for Limited Run. Look out for future releases in the coming months.

» Josh Fairhurst is the co-owner of Limited Run Games, a company that specialises in physical releases for games that start off on digital stores.

This probably explains why the company has recently been releasing PS3 games and is considering going back even further for future releases. "I have this weird thing about wanting to support dead or dying platforms. It just appeals to me at a core level because my favourite platforms (Dreamcast and Saturn) were neglected and I would have killed for someone to step in and breathe life into them at the last moment."

The re-release of NES and Game Boy cartridges certainly suggest that we can expect many older titles from Limited Run Games in the future, something that makes us extremely happy. "Yeah, we're pretty much looking at all platforms at this point," concludes Josh. "I'd love to be able to officially release some games that never made it to the west like *Shin Nekketsu Kouha: Kunio-tachi No Banka*. I'm a big fan of the *Kunio-kun* (*River City*) series, so that would be cool. We're also doing a lot of original development for retro consoles – like we did with *GALF* on NES. You'll see more of that kind of stuff from us in the coming months!"

> **"I'm really obsessed with nostalgia and the things I enjoyed growing up"**
> Josh Fairhurst

» Limited Run Games is releasing the special edition of *Shenmue III* in the US after Josh discovered Deep Silver was only planning to release it in Europe.

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retro radar THE VAULT

THE COOL RETRO STUFF THAT WE'VE HAD OUR EYE ON THIS MONTH

Tomb Raider Legends: The Board Game

Fans of Lara Croft should get plenty of enjoyment from this new offering by Hobby Japan. Playing as one of four different Laras, your aim is to retrieve a valuable artefact from the modular tomb and escape with it before one of the other players does. Along the way you'll gain experience, play action and raid cards, set traps, discover shortcuts and generally make life difficult for the other players as you try to succeed in your task. It's all finished off with some decent quality components and plenty of gorgeous art from the long-running series.

Price: £49.99
From: amazon.co.uk

PICK OF THE MONTH

Mortal Kombat T-Shirts

One of the best ways of showing your appreciation of a classic videogame is to wear it proudly across your chest so you can pretend you're a walking advertisement for the brand in question. Fans of *Mortal Kombat* will be delighted with the latest range of T-Shirts from Numskull as they feature a variety of styles that should suit all fans of the series. Our clear favourite is the excellent 'Choose Your Fighter' offering which features all the original members from the first games. There's also a cool depiction of Raiden doing what he does best, as well as a gorier offering that shows someone's heart ripped out. Ouch!

Price: £14.99
From: geekstore.com

Greatest Gaming Icons

Our latest book is dedicated to the best gaming heroes of all time, from Mario and Sonic to Lara Croft and Master Chief. We've selected 50 iconic characters from the last 40 years of gaming – some, like Pikachu, Crash Bandicoot and Donkey Kong, have gone on to become household names, while others like Superfrog and Monty Mole burned brightly for a short time before fading. Gaming wouldn't be the same without them, though.

Price: £12.99
From: myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

Gamer Nation

Fans of American culture should certainly consider this new book from John Willis. It's a fascinating read that looks at how games have depicted the land of the free and how they've become intrinsically entwined over the years. No stone is left unturned, and Willis turns his attention to all manner of different games from early efforts like *Pong*, *The Oregon Trail* and *Gun Fight*, to controversial offerings such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series and *Custer's Revenge*. Gamer Nation covers all aspects of gaming from those early days to modern hits like *Fortnite*, meaning there's plenty to relate to, even if you've never visited the US.

Price: £26
From: amazon.co.uk

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Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance broadcaster who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. He currently hosts *The Late Night Alternative* show at weekends from 10pm on www.talkradio.co.uk and runs daily retro streams on www.twitch.tv/iainlee.

Saturn my backside all day

I have a couple of huge gaps in my gaming life. The biggest was when I was 19, around 1992. The last console I'd really played on had been my BBC. I had a few drunken sessions with mates playing *Sonic The Hedgehog*, but I thought I'd grown out of that kind of stuff. I went to university, got up to all kinds of mischief and forgot about games.

A few years later a girlfriend and I were visiting a friend of hers. It was a pleasant enough evening, but one that would change my life forever. That night would eventually feed my kids, buy me a kitchen and get me the gig writing this column in **Retro Gamer**. Claire, whose house it was, had a big black box by her TV. I asked her what it was. 'Oh that, that's pretty cool. Hang on, let me turn it on.' She pressed a few buttons and there were some swooshes and swirls and she handed me a controller. It was the first time I had ever heard of *WipEout* and also my first time handling a Sega Saturn. My mind was absolutely blown. In the few years I'd been away from the world of videogames, to say things had come on in leaps and bounds was an understatement. The last thing I had paid any real attention to was *Citadel*, which was fun but clunky. Suddenly, I was playing an actual arcade game in a living room. I was speechless. The game itself was way too fast for my slow human brain to play successfully but like an addict picking up a drug after years of being clean, I was completely hooked.

I spent the next three months reading up on Saturns and PlayStations, deciding which one to get. I'd lost badly in the VHS/Beta wars of the Eighties and I couldn't afford to make the same mistake again. Eventually, I plumped for the Sony machine and for the first time in my life I backed a winner.

Recently there has been a nagging feeling in the back of my head. The Saturn had become a joke, a seemingly failed machine that was the start of Sega's demise. But what if that was wrong? What if it actually was a decent console that had something different to offer.

I bought one. I did some more research and it was suggested I get a Japanese model and a cart that would allow me to play games from around the world. The excitement when the beast arrived was ridiculous. I streamed my opening and plugging in on my Twitch channel but still wasn't sure what to expect. Some lovely people from the Saturn Junkyard Facebook page sent me a few games and controllers to get me started and I was away. My god, it's stunning. At the time I can see why Sony blew it out of the water, but just like the Dreamcast versus the PS2, history has been unkind to Sega. The Saturn has so much to offer Admittedly these are early days for me. The obvious choices of *Sega Rally* and *Nights Into Dreams* have taken up most of my time but I cannot wait to see what else this beast has to offer.

> "I was playing an actual arcade game in a living room. I was speechless"

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

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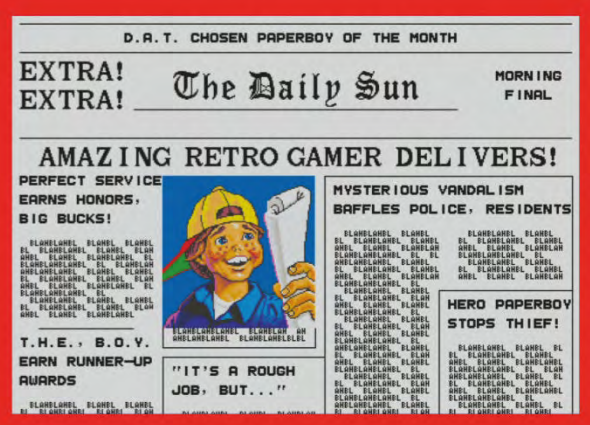
D.A.T. CHOSEN PAPERBOY OF THE MONTH

EXTRA! EXTRA! The Daily Sun MORNING FINAL

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PERFECT SERVICE EARNS HONORS, BIG BUCKS!

MYSTERIOUS VANDALISM BAFFLES POLICE, RESIDENTS

HERO PAPERBOY STOPS THIEF!

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

Sega power

Time is a great healer. Back in the Nineties, when writing about videogames was my full-time job, I gave poor Sega something of a hard time. I had very much been a Sega boy, picking up the Master System with my first ever paycheque, then spending £189 I didn't have on a Mega Drive. And then I got a Super NES, and there was such a confidence about Nintendo's games that Sega suddenly seemed a bit… desperate, if that's the right word?

When I found myself writing about games professionally (or unprofessionally, depending on your point of view), I felt duty-bound to point out Sega's mistakes. It was never out of a sense of vindictiveness. It was more like screaming at someone who you could see was set onto a path of pure self-destruction.

The Mega-CD was the first warning sign, then Sega's release-any-old-rubbish-game strategy weakened it next to Nintendo's quality-over-quantity approach, and then we got the 32X – the tipping point from which there was no coming back. We all know what happened next.

Now that I'm no longer stood in the eye of the storm, I've got a better perspective on the Sega story. I have massive admiration for the way the company took on the mighty Nintendo, and came close to winning. Sega was the underdog, and – looking at what the company achieved in that context – it's astonishing.

Sega's greatest failure – and even Nintendo struggled in the face of it, to a point – was not being quick enough to combat the PlayStation. Or, maybe, being too quick to leap into the next generation, before realising what it needed to do to go toe-to-toe with Sony.

The Saturn was a failure, at a point when the 32X meant that Sega could ill-afford another expensive flop. An unpopular release, weak marketing, the lack of a traditional *Sonic* game and flickering polygons, all contributed.

By the time the company had gathered itself and released a platform that did pretty much everything right – and yes, I do think the Dreamcast is one of the greatest games machines ever made – it was too late. Trust in Sega had evaporated.

At the time, many of us felt Sega deserved its fate. It had brought its downfall upon itself. Now, though, I think it's a shame that Sega is no longer in the hardware game, lest you include all those *Sonic*-branded arcade ticket dispensers.

Looking back, there was something beautifully rebellious about Sega, something anarchic and a little bit dangerous. It was never afraid to take risks. It felt real, in comparison to Nintendo's stuffy, kumbaya-isms, and Sony's corporate uberbranding.

It never feels right to me that Sega games appear on non-Sega consoles. Much as I roll my eyes at new Atari and Intellivision hardware, I'd actually welcome a new Sega machine. Just a handheld. Doesn't need to be super powerful. Just something that can be home to new versions of *Streets Of Rage*, *Sonic Mania* – a heritage console, if you will. Something which embraces the underdog spirit, for a generation that grew up loving Sega, and for those of us who have grown to appreciate what it brought to the games industry. ✱

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

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Ice to see you

Steve Jarrett has unearthed a unique version of Frost Byte

Steve has been collecting and selling vintage videogames via his eBay venture, The Last 8 Bit Game Shop, for a long time. As a result he's seen everything from the mundane and boring to the rare and exciting. Recently, however, Steve came across a really unusual gem – alternate artwork for popular 8-bit release *Frost Byte*. Here he tells us what happened.

How did you come across this version of *Frost Byte*?
I had been contacted about a large collection of various format 8-bit retro games, so I said, 'Great, yes please!' and I asked for some clear photos of the collection before buying. When I received the photos, all the games were mixed up on their presentation, mainly 90 per cent C64 titles and a few Amstrad and Atari games. After looking at a second photo of around five, I spotted *Frost Byte*!

What was the big deal, it's a common game, right?
At first I thought it was a homebrew cover, then after some closer looking at the photo, I knew it looked way too professional. I was like, 'Wow!' and excitement took me and I had goosebumps! I then contacted the seller in seconds and purchased *Frost Byte* and a few other games from the collection. You have to move fast as collections get sold very quickly!

So tell us what happened next...
I did some reference work online to see if that cover had been uploaded, or if it had been used on another format, which it hadn't. I then knew it was special. I went straight for *Frost Byte* and... well it looked fantastic. I checked the inlay and cassette and it was indeed an original cover and cassette!

You must have been thrilled, no?
Seeing the inlay, front, back and sides felt fantastic, like unearthing a rare artefact as an archaeologist. I couldn't believe it and really felt quite emotional! What a find! I remember buying *Frost Byte* back in 1986 and I absolutely loved it, so this felt extra special.

Have you had any interest in it from other collectors?
I have told quite a few CPC collectors, I have shown the cover to one collector who thought it was stunning! I will shortly pass a high-res scan of the artwork and cassette onto all the CPC sites online for everyone to see and enjoy.

So how often do rarities like this show up?
Well this is a once-in-a-lifetime find, really! They don't turn up much at all. I've been selling Amstrad games for over 20 years and have never seen anything like it! This could be one of three or four? At the time this was probably put out for review as a preview (as it's stamped on the cassette) to the Amstrad CPC magazines. It's possible Mikro-Gen may have asked for these to be destroyed after preview? Perhaps this was the only one to escape the offices?

What do you plan to do with it?
I plan to keep the *Frost Byte*, as it's one of my favourite games, I'll keep it in my collection. I will scan the cassette and inlay. I'll pass it onto all the online CPC sites for everyone to see and download. As for what it's worth? Well it's a one-off! It's priceless, really! Finding it was a real high point and something I'll never forget!

» [Amstrad CPC] You can read about *Frost Byte*'s creation in **Retro Gamer** issue 176.

» You can find Steve's eBay shop by searching for 'curious.eye'.

MIKRO GEN
FROST BYTE
AMSTRAD 464/664/128
Deep within the caverns of the planet Cosmia a lifetime
struggle for freedom is being lost. Kreezers from all over the
planet are being captured by the ghoulish monsters who
inhabit the planet craters. There is only one hope. A
Kreezer, once captured, now free, must now make his way
through the caverns fraught with danger to freedom. On his
way he must free the five other Kreezers also captured.
He has the ability - do you have the nerve?
To aid him on his way ammunition for destroying various
monsters can be found scattered around the planet. There
are also a variety of different coloured energy sweets which
he will need to complete his escape.
013894 000181
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Unit 15, Western Centre, Bracknell, Berks. 0344 427317

» The box art is completely different to the released version.

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

SEPTEMBER 2002 – It's another month where Nintendo grabs all the headlines, but while Mario has finally hit the system, it's not all sunshine for the GameCube manufacturers. Nick Thorpe takes a tumble into the past

NEWS SEPTEMBER 2002

The USA advanced plans to invade Iraq this month, but not without controversy. President George W Bush formally proposed the action to the UN Security Council on 12 September, alleging that Saddam Hussein's regime was illegally manufacturing weapons of mass destruction, but key nations including France, Germany and Russia felt that continued diplomacy and weapons inspections were a better option. Tony Blair set out his case for UK involvement on 24 September, just days before an anti-war protest in London, which drew 150,000 attendees according to estimates.

Euthanasia became legal in Belgium this month, following the implementation of a law passed earlier in the year, making it only the second country in the world to allow the practice (the first being the Netherlands). About 1,400 patients per year request the treatment, with the vast majority being terminally ill patients. The right to die was later extended to minors in 2014, with requirements for psychological assessment prior to the decision being taken.

On 22 September, the UK experienced its biggest earthquake for over a decade. The epicentre of the 4.7-magnitude shock was in Dudley, but the tremors could be felt from Truro to Carlisle. Fortunately, no injuries and only minor damage were reported.

[PC] PC gamers were well catered for this month with Blizzard's excellent *Warcraft* sequel.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM SEPTEMBER 2002

After all of last month's hullabaloo over a Nintendo press conference, you might have thought that the industry would move on and discuss something else for the month. But if you believed that, you'd be in the running for the presidency of Planet Wrong, as this month saw the speculation over Rare's fate hit fever pitch. *Cube* even ran a feature titled "Rare – Where?" consisting mostly of guess work and photos of people messing about near Twycross. The working assumption had been that the developer was to be purchased by Activision, but on 24 September, Microsoft confirmed its $375 million purchase of the company at the X02 event.

Starfox Adventures was confirmed to still be bound for the GameCube, as the project was very close to completion and used Nintendo characters. However, Rare had announced plenty of other GameCube projects including *Kameo*, *Perfect Dark Zero*, *Donkey Kong Racing*, as well as the Game Boy Advance game *Diddy Kong Pilot*. Suddenly, the status of these games was up in the air, with no announcement as to whether they would be moving or cancelled altogether. There was some degree of shock that Nintendo would allow a rival console manufacturer to wrest such a prized developer from its clutches, especially considering the quality and commercial success of Rare's N64 games, but we'll have to wait until next month to see what the magazines made of it all.

Thankfully for GameCube owners, Nintendo did have something positive to offer this month, as *Super Mario Sunshine*'s international release prompted a flood (or should that be FLUDD?) of gushing reviews. *NGC* offered readers a mammoth 12 page review, in which Geraint Evans scored the game 96% and described it as "as essential as air itself". The game was judged to be both "reassuringly familiar" and inventive, with the reviewer praising the game's capacity to surprise the player – "just when you least expect it, it throws something unexpected and magnificent into the mix, that's not only visually impressive but – more importantly – gives you something new to play with". *Cube*'s reviewers were similarly impressed, with the game scoring 9.6/10 and being deemed "everything we'd hoped and more",

[PC] The grand historical battles of *Medieval: Total War* were a great antidote to a slow release schedule.

LIFE
TIME
02:26:60
WATER

[GameCube] Though it wasn't the revolution its predecessor had been, *Super Mario Sunshine* delighted the critics.

RADLEY
RELOAD

[PS2] *Conflict: Desert Storm* was undeniably entertaining, despite the political climate at the time.

4,200

[GBA] It's quite amusing that David Beckham's platform game is better than his football games ever were.

though it felt that the level themes "lack that addictive sparkle of earlier tunes". *Edge* was a little more restrained in its praise, though it did score the game 9/10 and proclaim it "the second best platform game of all time". The magazine praised the "beautiful, inertial control" and the "perfect, brilliant design" of Mario's new water-shooting backpack, but criticised the game for being more repetitive than *Super Mario 64* and for being simpler, noting that "the search for shines shows no real touches of cunning".

Other consoles couldn't offer up anything quite so tantalising, though there were some good efforts out there. *Conflict: Desert Storm* arrived just in time to take grisly advantage of current events, but the game itself was a rather good third-person tactical shooter. *Official PlayStation 2 Magazine* awarded the game 8/10, claiming that "you can't beat the later missions without pre-planning and a decent multi-soldier strategy" and praising the "common sense" shown by AI soldiers on your side. *XBM* also awarded the game 8/10, with the reviewer claiming that the game was "hardly a prime example" of the console's visual capabilities, but praising the game design and the "godsend" co-op mode. Also on the PS2 this month, *TOCA Race Driver* scored 8/10 from *Official PlayStation 2 Magazine*, with the reviewer praising Codemasters "for giving the CPU drivers some balls". Tecmo's survival horror game *Project Zero* earned the same score, with reviewer George Walter excited to see "horror imagery on a console usually reserved for the dark realms of underground cinema".

Thankfully for PC gamers, there was a bit more to be excited about this month – presuming, of course, that you wanted to play strategy games. Blizzard's *Warcraft III: Reign Of Chaos* had taken a little time arriving, but it had been well worth the wait. *Edge* awarded the game 8/10, praising the game's "elegantly scripted narrative" and noting that while it has "little to do with innovation" and "may not be the revolution in real-time strategy that many had hoped for", it was "a significant evolution; and one which elevates the genre to previously unattained levels of sophistication". *Edge* also awarded 8/10 to The Creative Assembly's latest effort, *Medieval: Total War*. The magazine's reviewer felt that of all games in the real-time strategy genre, "the *Total War* games are the only ones which make an attempt at representing an actual conflict. Morale and positioning is what victory rests upon – not a tank rush".

Rounding out the month, *Formula One Arcade* gave PlayStation owners something to do, and scored 8/10 from *Official PlayStation 2 Magazine* and 75% from *Play*, which described it as "fast, playable and entertaining". On the Game Boy Advance, *Go! Go! Beckham! Adventure On Soccer Island* drew an 80% score from *NGC*, which was "very simple" but "so smooth and so much fun".

Join us again next month, we promise there will be games!

CHARTS

SEPTEMBER 2002

PLAYSTATION 2

1. Medal Of Honor: Frontline (EA)
2. Spider-Man (Activision)
3. Smash Court Tennis Pro Tournament (Sony)
4. Grand Theft Auto III (Rockstar)
5. Soldier Of Fortune: Gold Edition (Codemasters)

XBOX

1. Halo: Combat Evolved (Microsoft)
2. Hunter: The Reckoning (Interplay)
3. 007: Agent Under Fire (EA)
4. Project Gotham Racing (Microsoft)
5. Spider-Man (Activision)

GAMECUBE

1. Super Smash Bros Melee (Nintendo)
2. Pikmin (Nintendo)
3. Star Wars: Rogue Leader (Activision)
4. Luigi's Mansion (Nintendo)
5. 007: Agent Under Fire (EA)

MUSIC

1. The Tide Is High [Get The Feeling] (Atomic Kitten)
2. Got To Have Your Love (Liberty X)
3. Papa Don't Preach (Kelly Osbourne)
4. Nessaja (Scooter)
5. I Love It When We Do (Ronan Keating)

THIS MONTH IN...

XBM
THE THING
CONFLICT DESERT STORM
CRAZY TAXI 3
SPLINTER CELL
SEGA GT

XBM

"Wouldn't it be terrific if Bungie teamed up with Rare to make one super first-person shooter," asks reader Andrew Fernandez. "Tell Bill Gates to get his credit card out and buy Rare. It's just a thought but who knows…" Clearly Mr Microsoft listened, but we never did get to experience that particular dream team. Just imagine it…

NGC
MARIO SUNSHINE

NGC

"Little is known about the game, beyond a teaser trailer run as part of the DVD Extras section of Reflections' recent PS2 title, *Stuntman*," said *NGC*, concerning a new announcement from Infogrames. "That game ended up being something of a disappointment – *Driver 3* is unlikely to follow suit." A perfect prediction.

EDGE
Super Mario Sunshine

Edge

"What did the videogame publishers of the Eighties want from their box art? "Big explosions, big guns and big tits," Bob Wakelin told *Edge*. "But there was only so far you could go and most of the games didn't involve female characters anyway. It was only occasionally that I got the chance to produce softcore porn," he revealed.

Highlander

OFF WITH HIS HEAD!

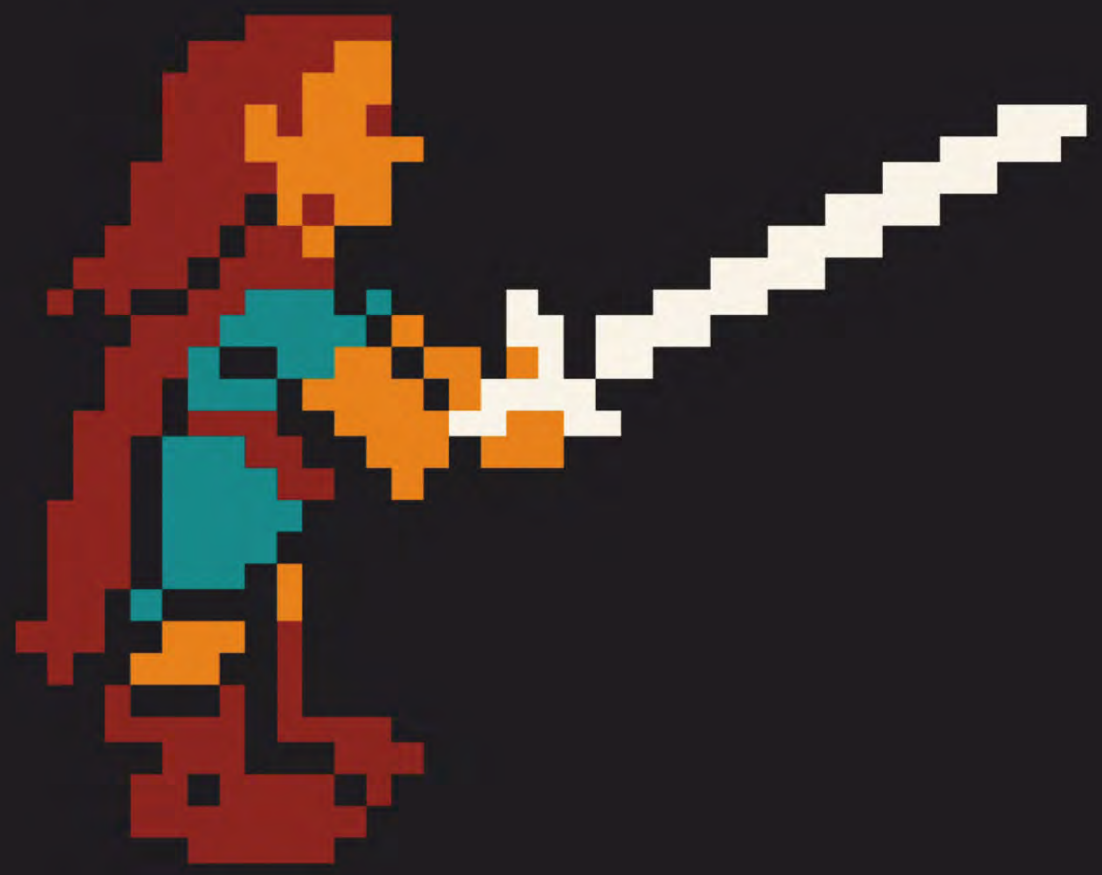
» CANVAS » 1986 » AMSTRAD CPC

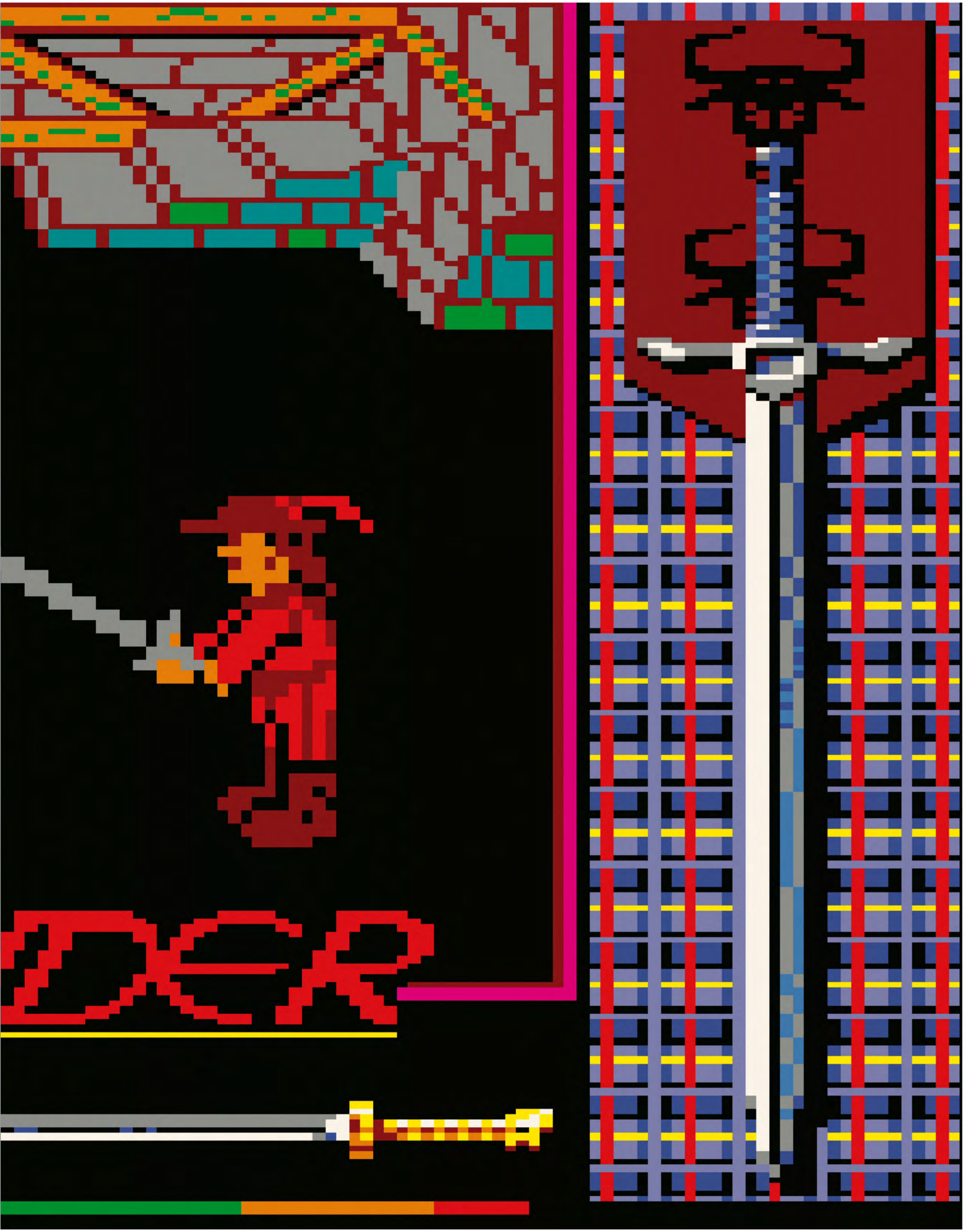
One of my favourite movies from the Eighties is *Highlander*. I don't think it's a particularly brilliant movie, but it's a film I was able to watch with my mum long before I was old enough to legally see it, which is probably why it left such a big impression on me. After all, who wouldn't love a film featuring wobbly accents from its two leads, a ferociously hammy turn by Clancy Brown, multiple decapitations and a killer soundtrack by Queen?

Needless to say when I found out that a *Highlander* game was available for my trusty Amstrad I begged and pleaded with my mum for a copy of my own. After being rebuffed by my mum, I went to my Nan (always a soft target) turned on the doe eyes and was promised the game for my birthday. Mission accomplished. What a pity, then, that *Highlander* turned out to be exactly the sort of game you don't want to receive as your main birthday present.

Highlander was from that period at Ocean Software when it was content to simply secure a popular licence, and attach it to a game, any game. Games like *The Untouchables*, *Batman* and *RoboCop* would change all that, but *Highlander* was before the quality control went up. The one nice thing I can say about it is that the Amstrad version has some really lovely sprite work, and that the big chunky sprites do a great job of replicating the stars of the original movie.

Sadly that's all *Highlander* had going for it, and I soon found myself annoyed with the fiddly controls, simple movesets and weak AI. It admittedly became a lot more fun when played with a friend, but there were so many similar games available, so we'd typically just go back to *Way Of The Exploding Fist* instead. Still, it did teach me not to be blinded by any future licensed games, so something good came out of owning it. ✱




DEATH

THE STORY OF

Shenmue

WHEN ONE OF GAMING'S MOST CELEBRATED DESIGNERS DECIDED TO CREATE A CUTTING-EDGE CONSOLE RPG, THE RESULT WAS ONE OF THE MOST AMBITIOUS PROJECTS OF ALL TIME. YU SUZUKI TELLS US HOW THE ORIGINAL CLASSICS WERE MADE – AND HOW HE'S REVIVING THE SERIES TODAY

Words by Nick Thorpe

Considering its short life, the Dreamcast is a machine with no shortage of excellent games, but none of them have quite the same association with the console as the *Shenmue* games. Part of that is practical – for almost 20 years, the Dreamcast was the only machine on which you could experience the original game, and therefore the complete tale. But the association goes deeper than that, as the game is reflective of the console that hosted it. Both *Shenmue* and the Dreamcast were incredibly ambitious projects that were ahead of their time in many respects, and both left players with the feeling that business was definitely unfinished, thanks to the premature discontinuation of the Dreamcast and the unresolved cliffhanger ending of *Shenmue II*. But where Sega's return to the hardware market feels as distant a prospect as ever, *Shenmue* is on the brink of a remarkable revival thanks to the undying support of its fans.

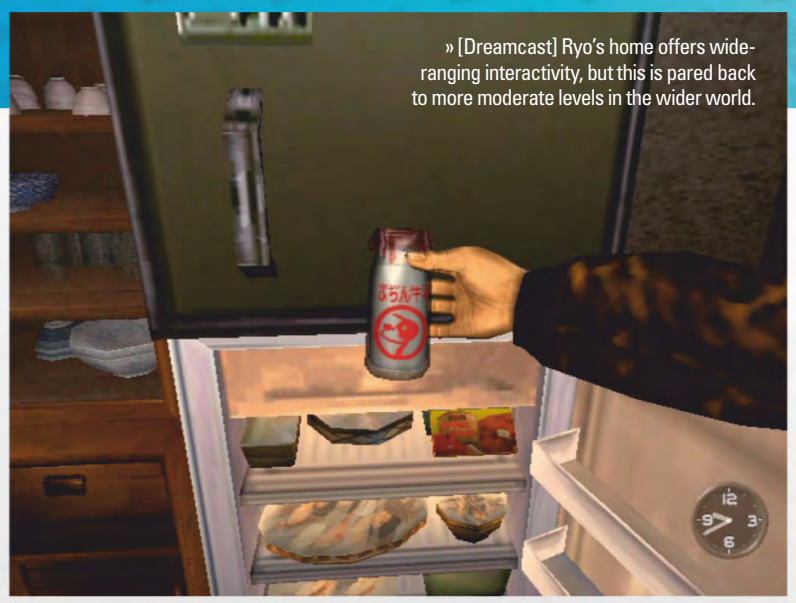
The *Shenmue* games are 3D action adventures, which are based on an original story concept by Yu Suzuki – the founder of Ys Net, and best known for his time at Sega, where he was a programmer, director and producer on hit arcade games such as *Space Harrier*, *Out Run* and *Virtua Fighter*. When asked what the very earliest influences on the creation of *Shenmue* were, Suzuki replies "They would be the games of Apple II such as *Wizardry* and *Mystery House*, as well as *Virtua Fighter*." Suzuki had enjoyed the Apple games while studying, and wished to create a game in that spirit. However, the *Virtua Fighter* connection goes beyond that simple inspiration. The first two *Virtua Fighter* games were smash hits in Japan, and many projects were in the works to capitalise on this success – spin-off games, merchandise and even an animated TV series. However, the big *Virtua Fighter* side project was Suzuki's own desire to create a *Virtua Fighter* RPG, which would follow the story of Akira Yuki.

Of course, RPGs aren't a tremendously arcade-friendly genre so AM2 would have to work with home console hardware, rather than the cutting-edge arcade hardware it was accustomed to. At the time, that meant working with the Saturn. Very little information about the Saturn version of the game has been made available to the public, with the most revealing being some video footage included as a bonus feature in *Shenmue II*. Much of the available footage is comprised of cinematic scenes (displayed in-engine, as in the Dreamcast game) with a little environmental exploration thrown in too. Though some details are naturally different, plenty of recognisable characters and scenes are shown, from the initial confrontation with Lan Di in the Hazuki family dojo to Ryo's first encounter with Guizhang, and the discovery of the hidden basement. Some designs look rather close to the final vision, and it's amazing how many scenes were developed.

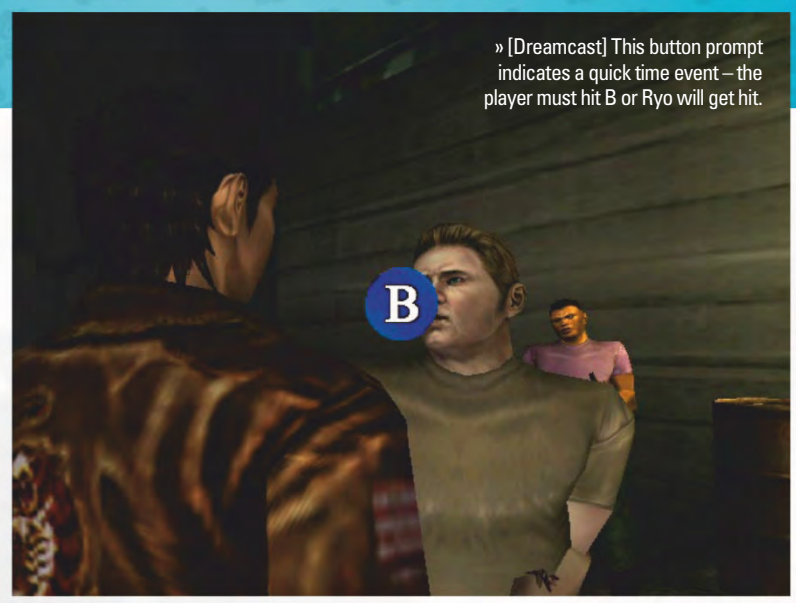
» Yu Suzuki is the creator of *Shenmue*, alongside other classics such as *Out Run*, *Space Harrier* and *Virtua Fighter*.

While much about the game is a mystery, one thing is obvious – *Shenmue* would have been a graphical masterpiece by the standards of the Saturn. Character models and environments showed a level of detail that puts most of the system's 3D games to shame, and there's a cinematic flair to the story scenes that few developers of the time possessed. We've often wondered how such visuals were possible on a console which is notoriously difficult to work with, especially when it came to displaying 3D graphics. "I would think one main factor was that I personally did the direction and coding by myself," says Suzuki. "At the time, very few tech people understood the true meaning of 3D."

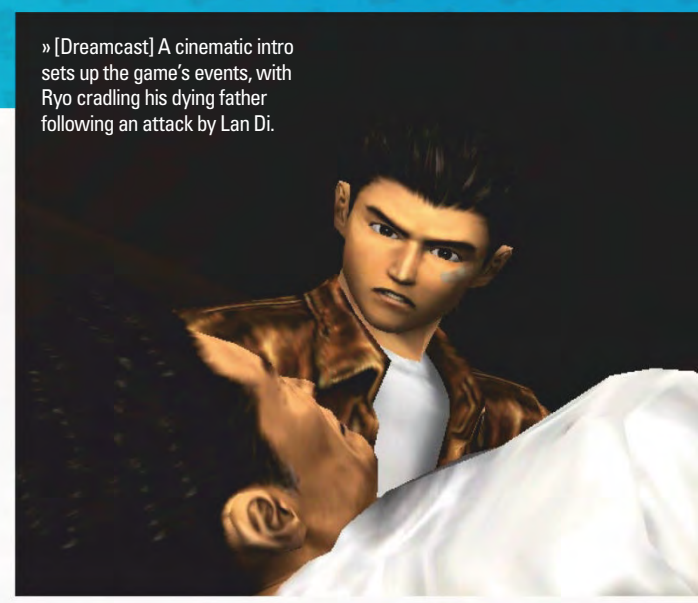
Ultimately, the Saturn version of *Shenmue* was never completed, as Sega was already planning a new console. In 1997, Suzuki decided to move the game to that system. "We started to see various possibilities in the Dreamcast while the development moved forward. We decided to move to the Dreamcast because we were confident the potential of *Shenmue* would increase tremendously with it." While it's not uncommon for games to switch generations during development, *Shenmue* looked to be in a fairly advanced state as the footage also shows off plenty of material



» [Dreamcast] Ryo's home offers wide-ranging interactivity, but this is pared back to more moderate levels in the wider world.



» [Dreamcast] This button prompt indicates a quick time event – the player must hit B or Ryo will get hit.



» [Dreamcast] A cinematic intro sets up the game's events, with Ryo cradling his dying father following an attack by Lan Di.

» [Saturn] The unreleased Saturn version of *Shenmue* looks like it would have been graphically astonishing for the time.

» [Xbox] The Xbox version of *Shenmue II* featured graphical changes such as bloom lighting at night, to mixed response.

that we would only see in *Shenmue II* – Hong Kong environments, the introduction of Ren's gang, and Ryo's first journey with Shenhua. With that in mind, we had to ask how close to completion the Saturn game was. "It's hard to say how many per cent complete it was, because when we changed from Saturn to Dreamcast, we also changed what we wanted to do. It was maybe 30 to 50 per cent complete."

Upon moving to the Dreamcast, *Shenmue* became known to the public as 'Project Berkley' before assuming its final name. The game also lost its *Virtua Fighter* connections, with Akira Yuki being replaced by the young man Ryo Hazuki, who sets out on a quest for vengeance after seeing his father murdered in front of him in late 1986. The game was announced not as an RPG, but as a new type of game called FREE ('Full Reactive Eyes Entertainment'), which was an acronym that unsurprisingly didn't catch on. Explaining this decision on the Project Berkley preview disc included with *Virtua Fighter 3tb*, Suzuki said that since his concept of what an RPG should be was quite different from that of other developers, it could be called a Suzuki-style RPG, but it was probably better not to call it an RPG at all. His stated goal was to create a game with more freedom and fewer restrictions than any game before it. The idea was that when the player explored the game, they should be able to talk to anyone they saw, and enter any building (or at least knock on the door). If you saw a vending machine selling drinks or capsule toys, you should be able to use it.

> **"When I decided to make an RPG, I decided 'Why not create a game with multi-concept content?'"**
> Yu Suzuki

***Shenmue* would be a broad adventure taking in a variety of concepts – a stark contrast to much of Suzuki's previous work, which had been focused on simulating single concepts such as motorbike racing or martial arts fights.** "When I decided to make an RPG, I decided, 'Why not create a game with multi-concept content?'" Suzuki recalls. "I wanted to make a game with a mix of what I could do. For example, because I loved fighting games, I wanted to have some fight scenes. I also love driving, so I wanted some driving scenes, and I also love cinematics." In this way, the concepts that Suzuki had been involved with over the course of his career would be brought together into one grand project. There was even an attempt to work gameplay into the cinematic scenes, with the 'quick time event' system – essentially simple button prompts that would allow players to perform complex cinematic actions, rather like in *Dragon's Lair*. "Because *Shenmue* is a thought-driven game, we judged that requiring time-sensitive game skill would not match the game, and we invented a game system called QTE which could be enjoyed by game players with low time sensitive game skill."

But as well as drawing on his previous work in the arcades, Suzuki wished to surpass it. "Before *Shenmue*, I developed *Virtua Racing* and *Virtua Fighter*, which were 3D games. When I started the development of *Shenmue*, I wanted a new dimension. I wanted to create a 4D game," he explains. "For me, the new dimension was time. When time disappears, 3D objects also disappear. For example, when time flies, the weather changes. And when you see reality, people don't stay in the same place all day long – they also have lives, they go to work and so on. So the 3D world evolves because of time, so I wanted to include this kind of notion."

Digital distractions

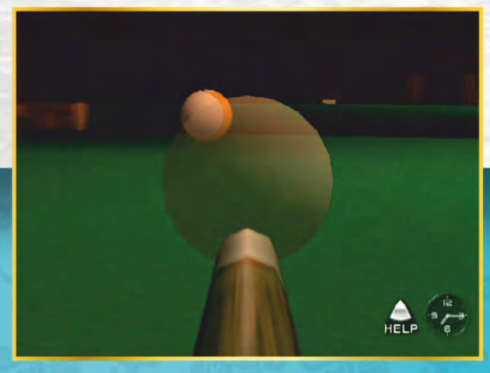
When the going gets slow and Ryo has to kill some time, there are plenty of ways to do it

Cat

Early on in *Shenmue*, you meet a kitten whose mother was run down by Lan Di's car. You can choose to raise it if you like, with cat food available in the convenience store.

Darts

You know the drill – chuck the pointy things at the board to score points. This minigame is quite tough, as Ryo's hand movements can be pretty erratic.

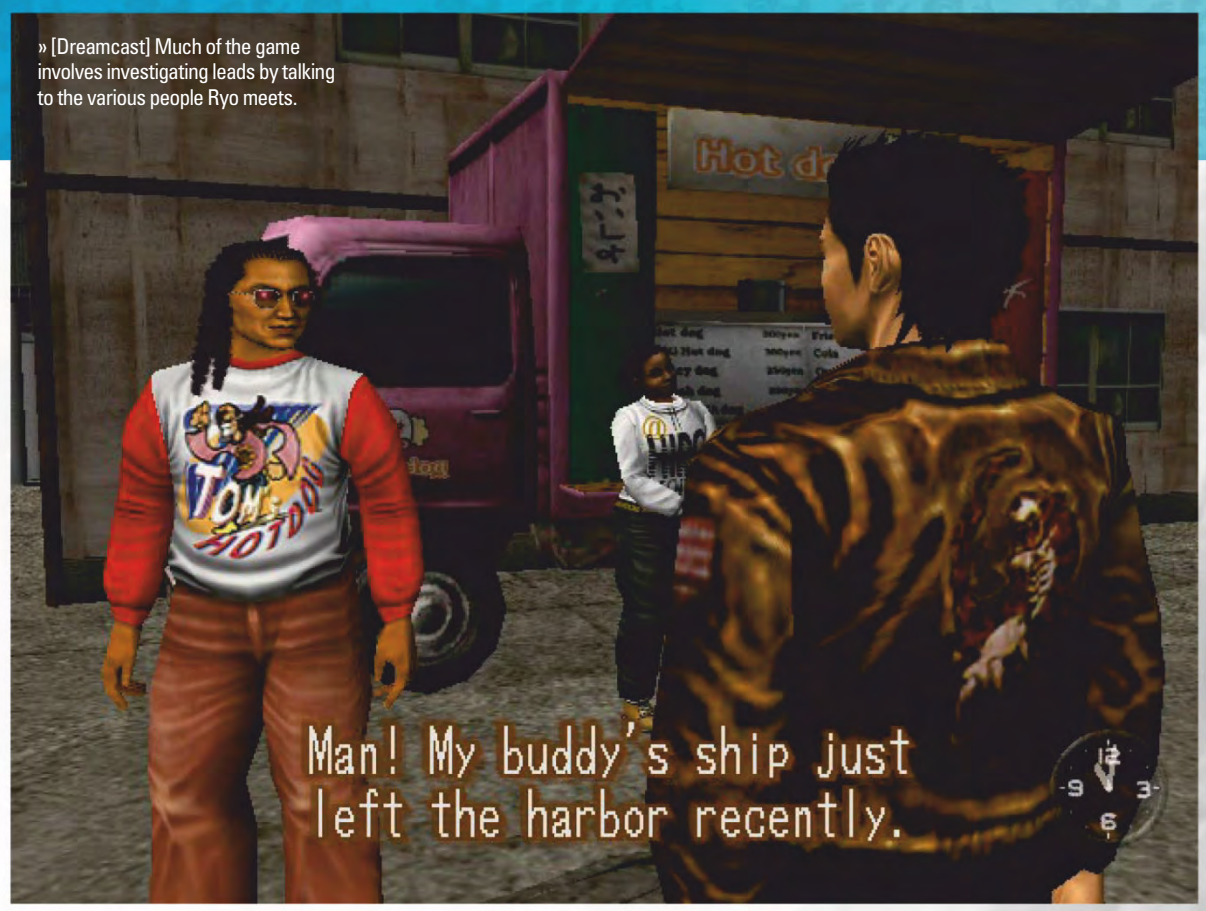


Billiards

Once you've played a game of pool for information in the MJQ Jazz Bar, you can play a quick game with some of the American sailors whenever you return.

Arcade games

As well as fictional cabinets like 'Excite QTE 2', *Shenmue*'s arcades offer real AM2 games like *Hang-On*, *Space Harrier*, along with *Out Run* and *After Burner* in *Shenmue II*.



» [Dreamcast] Much of the game involves investigating leads by talking to the various people Ryo meets.

Time was therefore an important factor in *Shenmue*. Where traditional RPGs featured 24/7 shops and ever-present townsfolk that always stood in the same spot, *Shenmue*'s world would change. The sun would set as night drew in, and seasonal decorations would go up as you approached Christmas. If you wanted to buy something from a shop, you'd have to turn up during opening hours – and if you watched the staff of those shops all day, you'd see them leave their homes, walk to work, open up and put their shifts in, and eventually walk home. As well as creating a great sense of immersion, this validated the various distractions the game world had to offer – just like in real life, you can't make time go any faster so you have to fill it. As well as the aforementioned vending machines, you were able to practice your fighting moves, play games of darts and pool, and even enjoy full arcade versions of *Space Harrier* and *Hang-On*.

Suzuki's interest in the console market allowed him input over the design of the hardware he was targeting. "I was in charge, along with other people, of developing the Dreamcast hardware. 3D games were very well done in the arcade market, the motherboards were ready. I wanted to put the really advanced arcade systems to the consumer market." Indeed, the Dreamcast ended up succeeding the Saturn, but also succeeded the existing Model 3 board in its arcade NAOMI form. This close involvement ultimately helped the game's development process. "I knew the hardware of the Dreamcast very well, and I also knew very well what I could or could not do. But of course, I had in my mind a very deep game idea. So what I couldn't do in hardware, I tried to do using software techniques like automatic generators. With programming skills, you can avoid some difficulties. Because of our progress with generators, we were able to put *Shenmue* on only three discs, instead of maybe 50 discs – if we had made *Shenmue* the old way, it would have taken 50 discs."

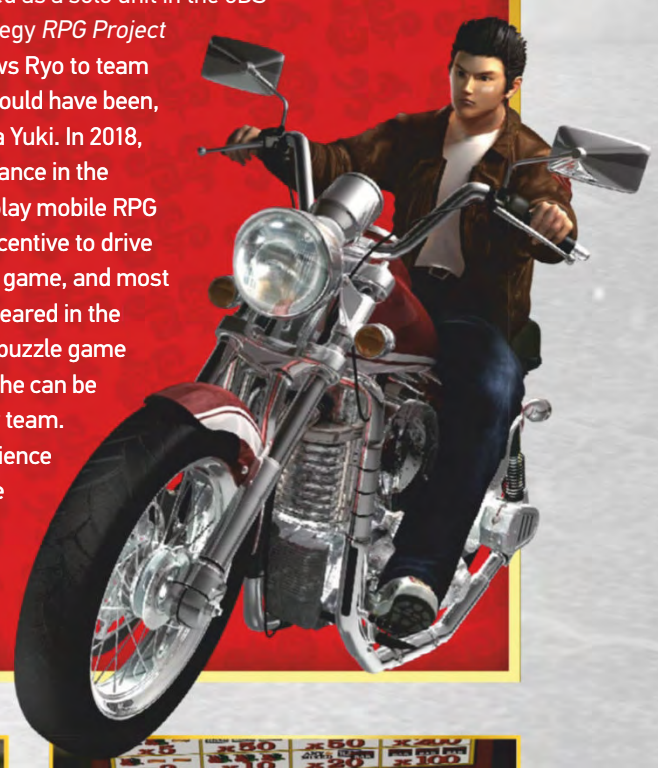
Shenmue just managed to squeeze itself into the Nineties, releasing on 29 December 1999 in Japan, with releases in North America and Europe following in October and November 2000. A special edition titled *US Shenmue* was later released in Japan in July 2001, which essentially added Japanese subtitles and notebook text to the English localised version. Some publications felt that the hype had not been warranted. *Game Informer* decided it was only worth 6/10, and *Video Gamer* gave it 7/10, with reviewer Nick Jones claiming it was "painfully slow at times" and had "very little substance",

CAM-RYO

ALTHOUGH RYO TOOK A LENGTHY HIATUS AFTER SHENMUE II, HE DIDN'T DISAPPEAR FROM GAMING ENTIRELY

It can be hard for a fan to keep the faith when a favourite series becomes dormant, but cameos will give them at least a little something to cling to – and Ryo Hazuki has fit in a few over the years. The earliest actually came pretty soon after the release of *Shenmue II*, as he was featured as a free agent in *ESPN NFL Football 2K4*, alongside other Sega characters. He later made an appearance in *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*, riding the motorbike he borrows during the later scenes of the original game. He didn't make the main roster of the sequel *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed*, but managed to make it in as DLC in the PC version. In this game, he drives an *Out Run* cabinet converted into a car, flies an *After Burner* cabinet and uses a floating *Hang-On* cabinet as a boat.

Since then, Ryo has appeared exclusively in pocket-sized form. He was included as a solo unit in the 3DS multi-franchise strategy *RPG Project X Zone 2*, which allows Ryo to team up with the man he could have been, *Virtua Fighter*'s Akira Yuki. In 2018, Ryo made an appearance in the Japan-only free-to-play mobile RPG *Kotodaman*, as an incentive to drive early sign-ups to the game, and most recently Ryo has appeared in the mobile match-three puzzle game *Sega Heroes*, where he can be recruited to join your team. You'll need some patience though, as he's at the Epic rarity level and takes considerable time and/or money to unlock.



DRINKING

Just soft drinks, of course! But if you get a winning can, you can exchange it for a prize at the convenience store – even if you want to gamble further on a lottery ticket.

MUSIC

If you come across a jukebox, you can play some sweet tunes. Alternatively, Ryo has a portable cassette player, but you'll need to buy the tapes and batteries for it.

CAPSULE TOYS

It's entirely possible to waste all of Ryo's hard-earned money on these little toys, which feature historical Sega characters and other cool little designs.

SLOT MACHINES

You can't actually win any money playing the slots in Dobuita, due to Japan's gambling laws, but you can exchange tokens for prizes, which is neat.

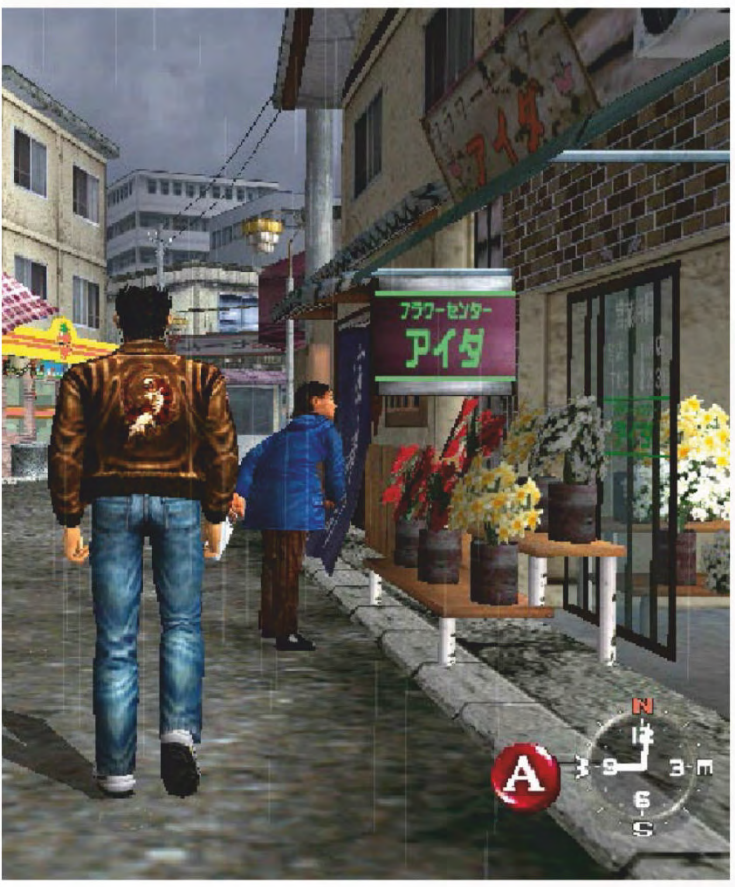
FALSE DAWNS

SHENMUE FANS ARE FINALLY GETTING THE REVIVAL THEY HAD HOPED FOR WITH SHENMUE III, BUT IT'S NOT THE FIRST ATTEMPT TO CONTINUE THE SERIES SINCE SHENMUE II

For over a year after the release of the Xbox version of *Shenmue II*, there was no news about a potential third instalment in the series, but in the summer of 2004 fans were whipped into frenzy by the announcement of *Shenmue Online*. This project was announced with a flashy CG trailer showing Joy getting taken captive by Lan Di and his goons, with Ryo and Xiuying mounting a rescue effort eventually aided by online players. Unfortunately, the game stumbled into trouble in mid-2005 with the withdrawal of JC Entertainment, a Korean company that had partnered with Sega on the project. The game re-emerged at the China Joy expo in 2006, with both new and old CG movie scenes and a lengthy look at gameplay, which showed off familiar Hong Kong environments and a revamped battle system. However, the project failed to reach the promised open beta stage, and *Shenmue Online* was quietly, but ultimately, cancelled.

Yu Suzuki later tried to revive the *Shenmue* series outside of Sega. Inspired by the success of casual social games like *Mafia Wars*, Suzuki worked with Sunsoft to create the mobile game *Shenmue City* for Yahoo Games in Japan. Although this was a considerable step down in scale compared to the flagship, cutting-edge nature of the main games, had it been a success, the plan was to use it as a basis to relaunch the series. However, *Shenmue City* was only active for just over a year, from its September 2010 beta launch to its closure in December 2011.

"HONG KONG IS BIGGER, WITH MUCH MORE PEOPLE AND MORE ACTION"
YU SUZUKI



» [Dreamcast] Weather effects are generated via algorithm, and are based on real weather data from the game's setting.

» [Dreamcast] As well as the major investigation and fighting elements, *Shenmue* included other game styles such as driving.

▶ but was "just about worth getting, if only to show your mates". Other magazines were more positive, but with notable reservations. *Edge* awarded *Shenmue* 8/10, praising the world simulation as "the closest a game universe has come in giving the impression of independence outside of your actions", but criticising the game as being surprisingly restrictive – "there is not enough distraction in the *Shenmue* world", the reviewer lamented, noting that "subquests would have greatly enhanced the experience" and concluding that it was "more than an interactive movie, but does not deliver the freedom expected". *Dreamcast Magazine* scored *Shenmue* 85%, with Chandra Nair noting that it was "a good RPG mixed in with brief elements of arcade action" and "not as ground-breakingly original as it makes out to be".

But broadly speaking, the game was critically acclaimed – the *Official Dreamcast Magazine* scored the game 10/10, with reviewer Ed Lomas claiming that, "You'll see where all the years and all the millions of pounds have gone when you play it, as it genuinely sets new standards in just about every way." Reviewers in other publications were similarly impressed – *CVG* awarded the game 5/5, *DC-UK* gave it the full 10/10 and *GamesMaster* went for a 94% score. *Shenmue* went on to sell 1.2 million copies – a phenomenal number by Dreamcast standards. The problem for Sega was that this was not enough to break even, as the game was the most expensive ever made to that point, with contemporary claims of a $70 million budget and Suzuki's lower 2011 estimate still coming in at $47 million for development and marketing. Just months after *Shenmue* made it to the western world, Sega announced that it would discontinue Dreamcast production and become a third-party game developer.

However, this was by no means the end of the story for *Shenmue* – it wasn't even really the end of the project, which explains why the second game was also released for the now-doomed Dreamcast. "The development of *Shenmue II* started and was done in parallel with *Shenmue*," says Suzuki. "By using common systems, its development was much faster than the one for *Shenmue*." Just like on the Saturn, Suzuki and his team had been working quite a way into the story, and early preview shots of *Shenmue* had even shown Ryo in *Shenmue II*'s environments.

Having successfully discovered where Lan Di was heading after he left Yokosuka, Ryo ended the first game on a boat departing for Hong Kong. A chapter on the boat was developed but ultimately cut for space reasons, instead being released as a comic featuring Chai's attempt to take a little girl hostage and defeat Ryo. When Ryo begins *Shenmue II*, he arrives at Aberdeen Harbour in Hong Kong and soon ventures out into Wan Chai. With the familiar faces of his local suburban community now hundreds of miles away, Ryo quickly learns that he can't blindly trust the people he meets in the big city, as he attempts to save a boy from a beating only to end up with his bag stolen. This leads into a series of QTE sequences and fights, which establish *Shenmue II* as a much more action-packed game from the outset. We had to know if this was a natural consequence of the story direction, or a response to the criticisms of the original game's somewhat sedate pace. "Maybe both," Suzuki responds. "In the first one you were in Yokosuka and in the second one you go to Hong Kong, but Hong Kong is bigger, with much more people and more action. Everything is bigger than Yokosuka, so we had to put more life and action into *Shenmue II*. Then of course, during *Shenmue* we were ▶

» [Dreamcast] The stakes are raised considerably in *Shenmue II*, as Ryo faces deadly foes more frequently.

also improving our skills, and what we couldn't do in the first one, we were able to do in the second."

The additional action sequences weren't the only thing that changed the feel of *Shenmue II*. For a start, the impatient could now arrive at the location of an important event early, and choose to skip time. There was also a considerably greater sense of freedom – the player could now choose what questions Ryo would ask NPCs, and more of them were able to help. Where failing a QTE sequence or fight in the original game often necessitated a retry, *Shenmue II* would more regularly let the player figure out an alternative way to achieve their goal. Perhaps most importantly of all, Ryo's means of securing an income were left up to the player – a particularly crucial point, as Ryo spends much his time in Wan Chai living in a hotel.

After finding the person he seeks in Wan Chai, Ryo visits Kowloon – specifically, the notorious Walled City, famed as much for its lawlessness as for its dense network of tall, interconnected buildings. This had been demolished in 1993, so a location visit was not possible. "We used photo materials and books as references," says Suzuki. "We decided to make its outlook as a standalone castle on the mountain top in order to create images of the Deathbringer's Citadel." Suzuki wanted to create a representation of Kowloon in which the player could visit all of the rooms, but building so many would take an enormous amount of time on the part of the development team. These were instead created using another generator system.

"We developed a very useful tool called 'Magic Room'. This automatic generator tool enabled us to create a room in a very short amount of time – we were able to create more than a thousand rooms in less than a second, maybe four milliseconds.

"We also developed another generator tool called Magic Maze which allowed us to create a forest in a very short time," Suzuki continues. This would come to be used in the final area of *Shenmue II*, which takes on a markedly different pace from the rest of the game. Having settled his business in Kowloon, Ryo travels to mainland China and meets Shenhua, the girl who he has been destined to meet. The urban environments of the prior chapters are discarded in favour of a large natural environment, where Ryo and Shenhua learn about one another through relaxed conversation as they walk back to Shenhua's home village. Some players were perplexed as to the decision to end the game on this note, rather than after the climactic battle in Kowloon that provided a sense of resolution. "It was because of the scenario," Suzuki says of the decision to finish the game here. "When you start your adventure in Yokosuka, it's a middle class area, and Hong Kong is a fast and speedy city. And then because of the scenario, you also go to the countryside of China, and now it's a very slow life, a very peaceful environment."

Shenmue II was released for the Dreamcast in September 2001, and a European release followed in November, with a much quicker localisation turnaround thanks to the fact that the game retained almost all of the original Japanese voice acting. Like its predecessor, the game received critical acclaim. *GamesMaster* scored the game 90%, and *Dreamcast Magazine* 94%, with the latter commenting that it was "much less linear than the original" and opining that "even haters of the original *Shenmue* will probably have some fun with this". Edge offered 8/10, praising the story as "more enthralling and exciting" and noting that "the sheer scope and beauty of Yu Suzuki's sequel is at times breathtaking". Microsoft secured the game as an Xbox exclusive in North America, so fans in that region had to wait until that conversion was released in October 2002, with a European Xbox release following in March 2003. The Xbox version featured graphical enhancements including improved water effects, bloom lighting at night and visual filters, and came packaged with a DVD movie showing the events of the first game. This version was also broadly well received critically, though received some criticism for having dated visuals. However, the game was not a commercial success as had been hoped.

» [Dreamcast] The final disc of *Shenmue II* is spent strolling through the beautiful Chinese countryside with Ryo's new friend Shenhua.

Unfortunately, *Shenmue II* ended on a cliffhanger, and fans would soon become frustrated as no progress was made on advancing the series. Though a couple of failed attempts to revive the series were made, *Shenmue* essentially fell dormant. Although Ryo Hazuki would show up in projects like *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*, many players

"DURING SHENMUE WE WERE ALSO IMPROVING OUR SKILLS, AND WHAT WE COULDN'T DO IN THE FIRST ONE, WE WERE ABLE TO DO IN THE SECOND"
YU SUZUKI

WORKING 9 TO 5

HOW EXACTLY DOES RYO MAKE A LIVING? LET'S FIND OUT...

FORKLIFT DRIVER

This one's mandatory in the original *Shenmue*, as it's an important part of the plot. You do at least get to race the forklifts before each shift starts, which adds a little fun.

CRATE CARRIER

You'll have to do at least one shift in this job during *Shenmue II*, and it's a relatively tedious but dependable way to earn money, particularly if you're good at quick time events.

UNDERGROUND GAMBLER

The lax law enforcement in Hong Kong leads to plenty of opportunities to have a little flutter. This is a risky proposition, but if it pays off you'll obtain money pretty quickly.

» [Dreamcast] *The Shenmue* games were astonishing graphical achievements on the Dreamcast – it's hard to believe they're 20 years old.

assumed that there was no serious prospect of a third game – and the chances seemed to diminish further when Yu Suzuki left Sega. During this time, fans decided to make their voices heard, taking to Twitter on the third day of every month to campaign for a third game in the *Shenmue* series, using the #SaveShenmue hashtag. Eventually, at Sony's memorable E3 conference in 2015, Yu Suzuki was able to stand on stage and announce that a Kickstarter campaign to fund *Shenmue III* had begun. The game would release for PS4 and PC, and was targeting a December 2017 release date – which would eventually get pushed back to 19 November 2019. The response from fans was enormous. "Because everything we did was a new challenge, we were concerned about 'being able to do it properly,'" says Suzuki. "It was hard to imagine it would become the most successful." But the campaign raised $6,333,295 from 69,320 backers, breaking the record for gaming products on the crowdfunding platform that had been set by *Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night* earlier that year. A 'slacker backer' campaign ran following the closure of the Kickstarter campaign, bringing the final total of fan funding to $7,179,510 from 81,087 people.

One thing that is particularly interesting is that *Shenmue III* has attracted the return of a number of key figures from past *Shenmue* games. "Everyone who has supported came with full of love of *Shenmue*. We feel even the tough memories of hard times support our deep relationship," says Suzuki. "I believe some may have joined the project thinking, 'Is it okay to leave Suzuki alone?'" Both Ryo's Japanese and English voice actors, Masaya Matsukaze and Corey Marshall respectively, reprise their roles.

LUCKY HIT ATTENDANT

How about a game of Lucky Hit? Ryo gets two hours to entice players into competitive Lucky Hit games, and keeps 50 per cent of any profit he makes

ARM WRESTLER

If Ryo can use his strength (by which we mean your button-bashing and some quick-time event skills) to defeat menacing, muscular men, he'll win a good deal of cash.

STREET FIGHTER

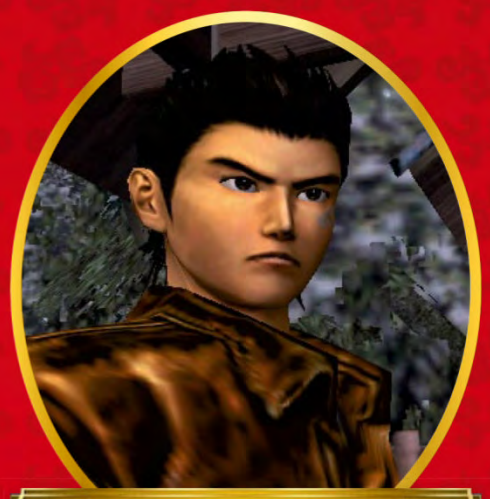
A variety of tough folks can be found in Hong Kong, many with their own quirks like missing eyes and incredible fortitude. If Ryo can defeat them, a cash prize awaits.

USED GOODS TRADER

If you've got a bit of Del Boy in you, you can sell capsule toys and other collectable items to pawn shops – just make sure you shop around to get the best price.

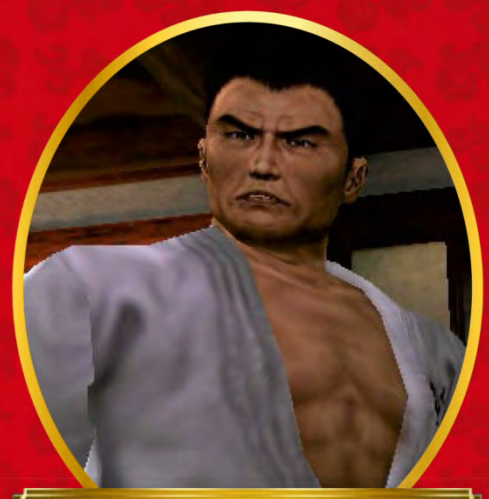
WHO'S WHO

A GUIDE TO THE MOVERS AND SHAKERS OF THE SHENMUE WORLD



RYO HAZUKI

Your character is an 18-year-old high school student who sets out for revenge after witnessing his father's murder. He's pretty oblivious to the affections of women and often acts a little quicker than he thinks, but he's a formidable fighter and very tenacious.



IWAO HAZUKI

Ryo's father is a middle-aged martial arts instructor, who is murdered during the introduction sequence of *Shenmue*. He's often seen in flashbacks, providing Ryo with words of wisdom, and apparently killed a man named Sunming Zhao.

LAN DI

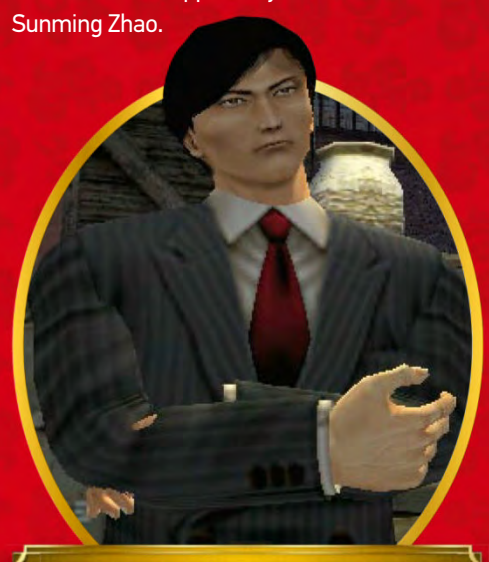
This stony-faced chap is a leader of the villainous Chi You Men cartel, and Iwao Hazuki's killer. He seeks to gain possession of the Phoenix and Dragon mirrors, and fights using the Tiger Swallow style favoured by *Virtua Fighter*'s Lau Chan.

CHAI

This bizarre and decidedly unkempt man wants to join the Chi You Men and work for Lan Di. To this end, he is a thorn in Ryo's side throughout the original *Shenmue*, attempting to steal the mirrors and thwart Ryo's attempts to leave Japan.

NOZOMI HARASAKI

Ryo's classmate also happens to serve as his love interest for the first game, and at one point ends up being kidnapped by a dockside gang. She's originally from Vancouver, and plans on leaving Yokosuka to return to Canada and live with her parents.



GUIZHANG CHEN

Though he's a businessman first and foremost, Guizhang is a formidable fighter who aids Ryo during the events of the first game. His father, Master Chen, is well aware of the significance of the mirrors and Lan Di's pursuit of them.

JOY

Ryo meets his first friend in Hong Kong after almost being run down by her beloved motorbike. She proves to be an important ally, as she's well connected – both within respectable society and within the local gang scene.

WUYING REN

The leader of the Heavens gang in Aberdeen is a brash counterpart to Ryo – though he's capable of looking after himself, he's driven entirely by wealth and not particularly concerned with any notion of justice. He's rather more charismatic, too.

XIUYING HONG

The head of the Man Mo Temple in Wan Chai is also a martial arts expert. Although she aids Ryo during his travels in Hong Kong, she attempts to dissuade him from seeking revenge, fearing that his quest will lead him towards an evil path.

YUAN

Despite appearances to the contrary, Yuan is Dou Niu's right-hand man and an utterly terrifying individual. He has a distaste for anything he perceives as dirty, and loves cutting up foes with knives and far, far more dangerous tools.

DOU NIU

This gargantuan individual is a powerful figure in Kowloon's criminal underworld. As well as possessing terrifying physical strength, he's the leader of the Yellow Heads, a large gang that works with Lan Di's Chi You Men cartel.

SHENHUA LING

This Chinese girl grew up in a small, picturesque village of Bailu surrounded by nature, and is rather innocent. She shares some sort of bond of fate with Ryo, and frequently appears in his dreams prior to their first meeting in *Shenmue II*.

» [PC] The arcade returns in *Shenmue III* – we're excited to see what games will be contained within.

The original game director Keiji Okayasu is overseeing development, scriptwriter Masahiro Yoshimoto has returned to develop the game's story, and Hiroaki Takeuchi will return to advise on animation and cinematic scenes. The main character designer Kenji Miyawaki has also returned, stating in an interview that *Shenmue* was "the one title in my life that I have the strongest personal attachment to", even going so far as to say, "I don't think I can die in peace until the next *Shenmue* comes out."

Although Suzuki can no longer draw on the resources of a hardware manufacturer seeking a killer app, many of *Shenmue*'s innovations are now relatively standard features, making development less of an exercise in research and development. But Suzuki still desires more of today's technology. "Of course, because of the hardware improvements and engine improvements, games are easier to develop than before. But I also regret that we are not further ahead in time, because I want to create a game a hundred times more easily than now. If I could I would! Some things we couldn't do before, but with other things we still can't do what I have in mind." In particular, one problem the team struggled with in the Nineties persists – the one that caused Lan Di to lose the long, flowing hair that was originally part of his design. "Clothes physics, we developed from scratch with *Virtua Fighter* and *Virtua Fighter 3*," Suzuki tells us. "There is still a lot to do to improve the physical part of engines. Of course, they are better than ever before, but we still can't make some realistic movements with clothes and hair, it's still hard to do."

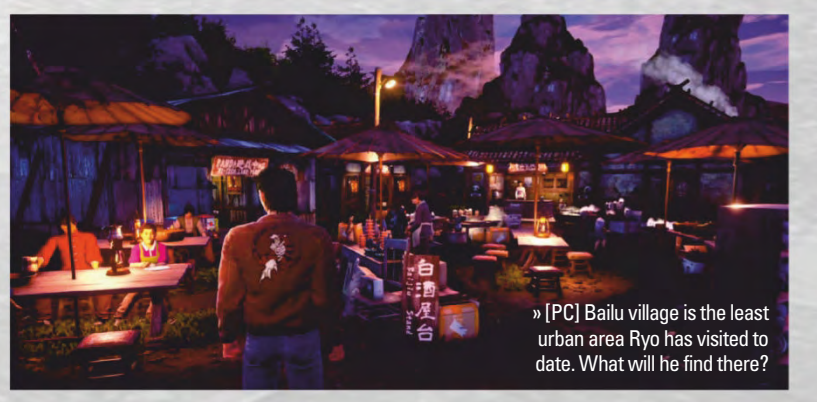
Shenmue III won't quite follow the original plan laid down back in the Dreamcast days. "At first I had in my mind that *Shenmue* would be chapter one, *Shenmue II* would be chapter two and so on. But sadly, there was a 20-year lag between *Shenmue II* and *Shenmue III*. So I had to make some changes to the original scenario, because if I wanted to go to the end, I would need more than one life!" Suzuki explains. "It's not shortening the story, but making some changes to tell it more efficiently." When it is released, *Shenmue III* will pick up Ryo's journey the day after the conclusion of *Shenmue II*, and chronicle his journey through Guilin with Shenhua. The main areas of the game are Bailu, Shenhua's home village, Choubu and a fortified castle area. Villains such as Chai and Lan Di will appear and presumably come face to face with Ryo, but he won't be alone as allies such as Ren will return too.

But although progress through the story is being accelerated and highly anticipated showdowns look likely, one thing *Shenmue III* won't do is provide a final conclusion to the saga. "If it's possible, I'd like to make the next step," says Suzuki. And in an odd way, we find that enormously reassuring. The *Shenmue* games were born from Yu Suzuki's belief in a grand vision, and were easily the most ambitious games of their generation. The plan to continue the series, in spite of the enormous difficulties that have been faced in creating the third game, is all the proof we need that Suzuki retains the ambition that he brought to those Dreamcast games. *Shenmue* and *Shenmue II* were released as a double pack for modern platforms in 2018, and revisiting the games now is fascinating – they still possess an amazing ability to draw you into another place and time, and the open world concept feels decidedly modern, yet the execution is clearly from a different era. But the fact that a 20-year-old Dreamcast game can feel modern in any respect is a major achievement, and we shouldn't expect anyone to follow *Shenmue*'s path when its creators were so determined that it shouldn't follow the RPG standard. Ultimately, there's nobody quite like Yu Suzuki in the games industry, and there are no games quite like the *Shenmue* games. ✱

» [PC] Lan Di will definitely appear in *Shenmue III*, but what role he'll take is currently unknown.

"IF I WANTED TO GO TO THE END, I WOULD NEED MORE THAN ONE LIFE!"
YU SUZUKI

» [PC] Chai returns to attack Ryo and Shenhua, having last been seen on the boat from Japan to Hong Kong.



» [PC] Bailu village is the least urban area Ryo has visited to date. What will he find there?

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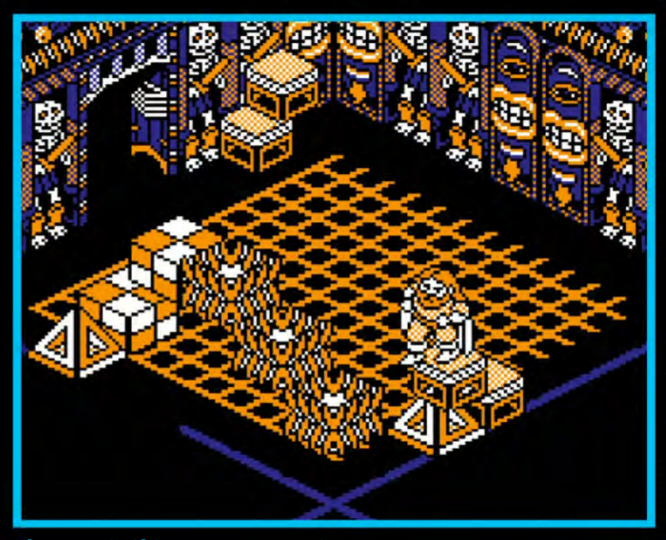
THE MAKING OF Super HERO

ENCOURAGED BY GETTING SEVERAL GAMES PUBLISHED WHILE STILL AT SCHOOL, PAUL MACHACEK DECIDED TO MAKE HIS HOBBY A CAREER. RETRO GAMER LEARNS HOW PAUL CREATED SUPER HERO WITH BERNIE DRUMMOND, AND THEN GOT A JOB WITH RARE

Words by Rory Milne

It's difficult to overstate the impact that Ashby Computers & Graphics had on the British games industry during the Eighties; its Ultimate titles inspired everyone from the firm's rivals to aspiring developers. Schoolboy Paul Machacek was so taken with ACG's output that he produced a series of tributes, the success of which convinced him to remain in the industry after sitting his exams, as he explains. "I'd been writing games while doing my O and A Levels, and was starting to get them published," Paul remembers. "On leaving school, I carried on working full-time at home to develop new titles and was trying to develop a career. So I wrote to the letters page of a big monthly magazine suggesting that I wanted to team up with other developers, and maybe start a studio."



» [Amstrad CPC] Certain obstacles in *Super Hero* require a makeshift bridge to be built and climbed over.

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** CODEMASTERS
- **DEVELOPER:** PAUL MACHACEK AND BERNIE DRUMMOND
- **RELEASED:** 1988
- **PLATFORM:** AMSTRAD CPC, ZX SPECTRUM, COMMODORE 64
- **GENRE:** ADVENTURE

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

BATMAN
SYSTEM: ZX SPECTRUM, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1986

HEAD OVER HEELS
SYSTEM: ZX SPECTRUM, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1987

BATTLETOADS (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: GAME BOY
YEAR: 1991

Soon after his letter appeared in print, Paul found himself fending off unqualified or worrying respondents, but then a developer with a familiar name got in touch. "I got a call from someone calling himself Jon Ritman," Paul recollects. "The name rang a bell, but the penny hadn't dropped, then he mentioned he'd written a little game called *Batman* for Ocean Software. He came over to visit, and I showed him something I was working on. We became friends, and then he introduced me to Bernie Drummond."

Having reviewed Paul's latest effort, Jon subsequently returned the favour, which proved to be inspirational. "When Jon showed me a work-in-progress *Head Over Heels*, I became very keen to create a game that was a mix of Ultimate's *Nightshade* and *Knight Lore*," Paul enthuses. "Jon suggested that I work with Bernie, and Guy Stevens. So the scene was set. I really wanted to do my own *Knight Lore*, and I had support from a real artist and musician."

Soon after clearing his existing workload, Paul chose a hero for his exciting new project, and came up with a name for it. "At this time, the game was called *Aidacra*, which is Arcadia backwards," Paul notes. "I referred to the player's character, which I'd not yet asked Bernie to do, as a 'Norse God,' who used a hammer as a weapon and winged boots to go faster or jump. I referred to his collectible hat as a 'helmut', which Jon found rather amusing, but the truth was that I simply misspelled 'helmet'!"

In the capable hands of artist Bernie Drummond, Paul's protagonist became the thunder god Thor, and with a player sprite in place, the developer started work on his latest game's level design. "The focus was on building a big adventure game that was a mix of elements from various other titles, yet always going back to what I liked about the Ultimate games," Paul reflects. "I started to design the central puzzle rooms around Thor's initial limited abilities, and then on finding the hat, bag, boots etc I designed around his increased

» [Amstrad CPC] *Super Hero*'s energy spheres can be used to travel safely over deadly surfaces.

abilities allowing him to explore the map further."

But as well as clusters of puzzle rooms, the map that Paul was building for *Aidacra* also incorporated sprawling outdoor sections. "The scrolling corridor sections were to be largely filled with random hazardous nasties that you initially had to avoid until you got your hammer," Paul considers, "at which time you could defend yourself a bit. But the meat of the game for me was tackling the static puzzle rooms, and I spent a lot of time working out new combinations of things to do in those."

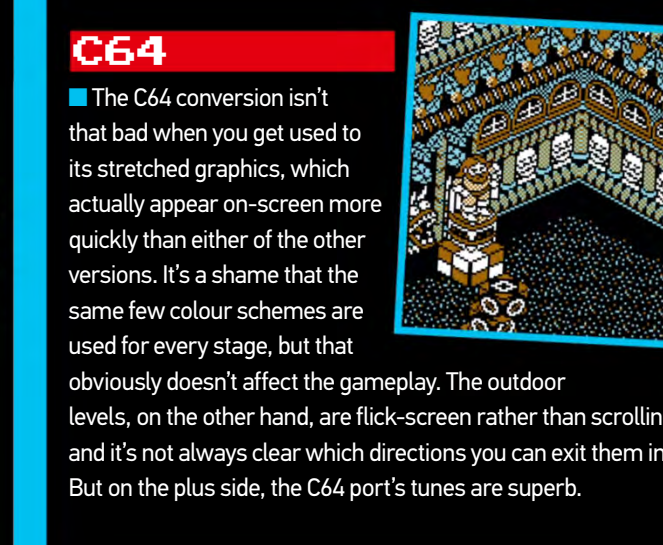
But a downside to Paul enthusiastically designing levels for *Aidacra* was its rapidly expanding size, and while viewing this as positive, he felt it needed addressed. "A big thing for many people was to map games out on paper," Paul reasons, "and I wanted *Aidacra* to be a big exploratory adventure. But I realised that the map was getting large, and there was a lot of travelling involved, and so I added teleports as shortcuts."

On completion, *Aidacra* was renamed *Super Hero*. The Spectrum original received solid reviews, while the Amstrad CPC 464 port got top-marks in many magazine write-ups, and the games subsequently secured a dream job for Paul with the creators of the Ultimate titles. "It was Codemasters idea to change the name – it hated *Aidacra*," Paul sighs, "but I was extremely proud of *Super Hero* when it was published. I later showed it to Tim and Chris Stamper, which resulted in me getting my job at Rare. I then became involved with doing very different types of games, and that was fine." ✱

» *Super Hero* was Paul Machacek's fourth, and most successful, tribute to Ultimate's games.

» Artist Bernie Drummond created this stunning self-portrait for **Retro Gamer** in lieu of providing a photo.

» [Amstrad CPC] *Super Hero*'s conveyor belts move forwards or backwards, but you don't know which until you jump on them.



» [Amstrad CPC] Some of *Super Hero*'s levels require you to rotate Thor 90 degrees mid-leap, which takes some practice.

CONVERSION CAPERS

WHICH SYSTEM HAS THE BEST HERO?

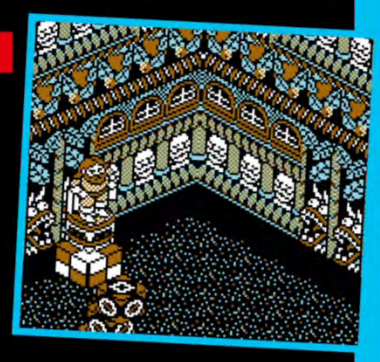
ZX SPECTRUM

Like the ports, the Spectrum original is a game of two halves. Its static puzzles look like lost levels from *Head Over Heels* – thanks to Bernie Drummond creating art for both games, and they share mechanics with Jon Ritman's classic, although each one is unique. The game's scrolling sections play like *Nightshade*'s, but with simpler combat, and like its puzzle rooms, *Super Hero*'s outdoor challenges look as strange and beautiful as the adventures Bernie worked on previously.

AMSTRAD CPC

Paul Machacek and Bernie Drummond's Amstrad port recreates the original perfectly and has far superior aesthetics. Guy Stevens' chiptunes are the first thing you notice; the Amstrad's three voices do them so much more justice than the humble Spectrum speaker. Then there are Bernie's four-colour backdrops, which just pop out of the monitor in a way that his monochrome Spectrum equivalents simply don't. The only negative is that your score and gold tally don't appear on-screen.

C64



The C64 conversion isn't that bad when you get used to its stretched graphics, which actually appear on-screen more quickly than either of the other versions. It's a shame that the same few colour schemes are used for every stage, but that obviously doesn't affect the gameplay. The outdoor levels, on the other hand, are flick-screen rather than scrolling, and it's not always clear which directions you can exit them in. But on the plus side, the C64 port's tunes are superb.

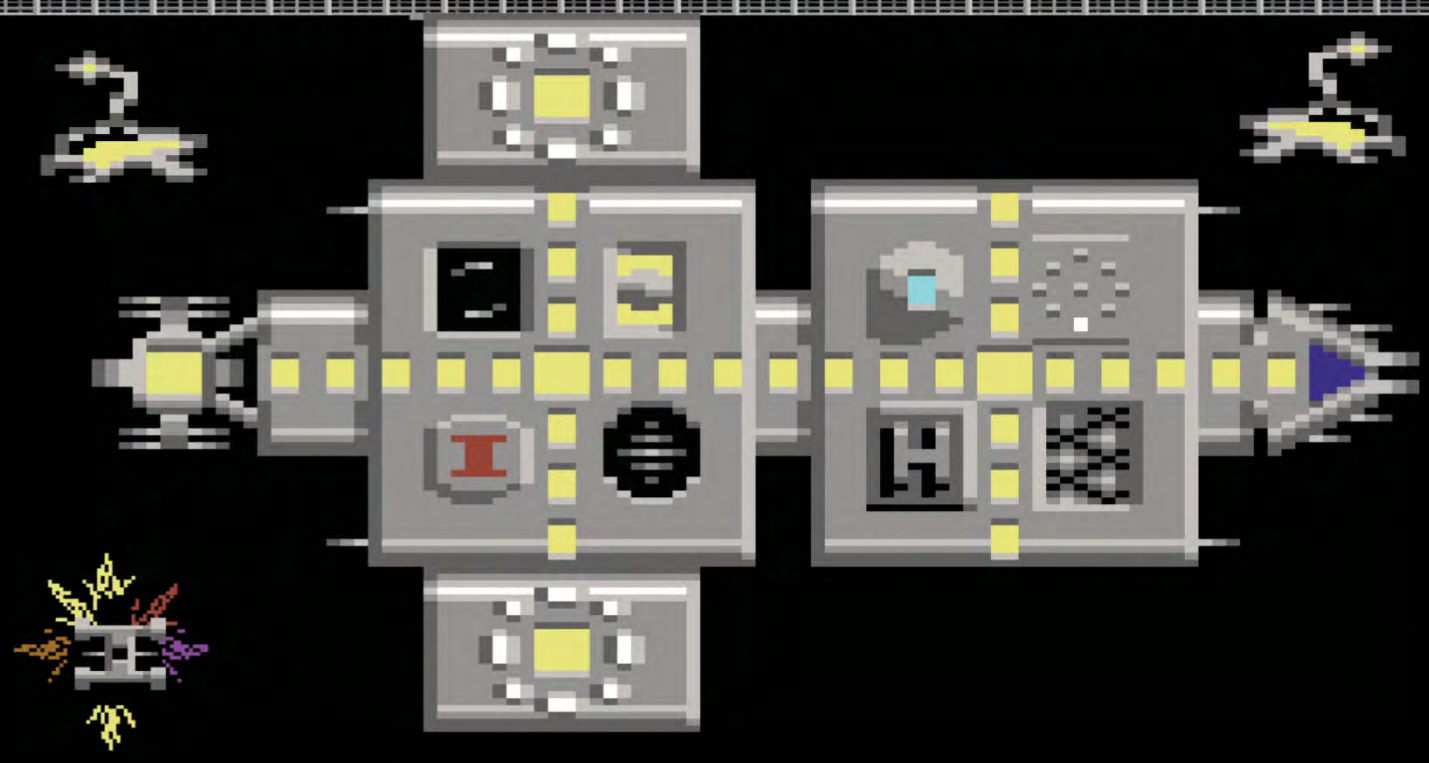
THE MAKING OF MORPHEUS

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** RAINBIRD
- **DEVELOPER:** ANDREW BRAYBROOK
- **RELEASED:** 1987
- **PLATFORM:** COMMODORE 64
- **GENRE:** SHOOT-'EM-UP

After topping the charts with Uridium, and going combat racing with Alleykat, Andrew Braybrook reinvented the shoot-'em-up. Retro Gamer learns how Andrew's ambitious shooter Morpheus combined bounty hunting, trading and evolving aliens

Words by Rory Milne

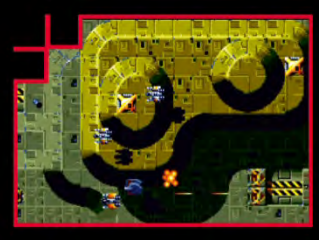


> **“The control mode was still fundamental to the game, but this time I was trying to get movement in all directions”**
> Andrew Braybrook

Rather than focusing on a single genre or repurposing mechanics, acclaimed developer Andrew Braybrook spent the mid-Eighties designing games that were so eclectic that the only thing they shared in common was just how different they were from one other. This was far from accidental, and so when Andrew opted to make a second deep space shooter towards the decade's end, he produced a design that was a world apart from his earlier hit *Uridium*, as he's keen to point out. “It was important to always try to do a crowd-pleaser, but not be lazy about it,” Andrew considers, “so I tended to do a different sort of game each time. *Morpheus* was the first time I had a sprite multiplexor to use, and initially I had a demo floating about 50 sprites around the screen. The downside was that fast scrolling became out of the question at 50 frames a second. I therefore chose to *not* scroll the screen and use another technique to show movement instead. Then other graphical experiments with grey shades gave me a metallic look.”

The series of increasingly large ships that Andrew designed for *Morpheus* were a primary beneficiary of this new aesthetic, and the developer decided to make these less agile and more durable than *Uridium*'s Manta craft. “The *Morpheus* ships were much bigger, implying that they would be heavier and less manoeuvrable than the Mantas,” Andrew argues. “The control mode was still fundamental to the game, but this time I was trying to get movement in all directions. And a big ship against little meanies being able to survive multiple hits just made sense.”

But besides providing greater protection from enemy attacks, the bulky space cruisers that Andrew was designing for his latest project also had the capacity to accommodate a wealth of upgrades. “*Morpheus* was all about choosing your ship add-ons and controlling your extra weapons,” Andrew explains. “It was all down to

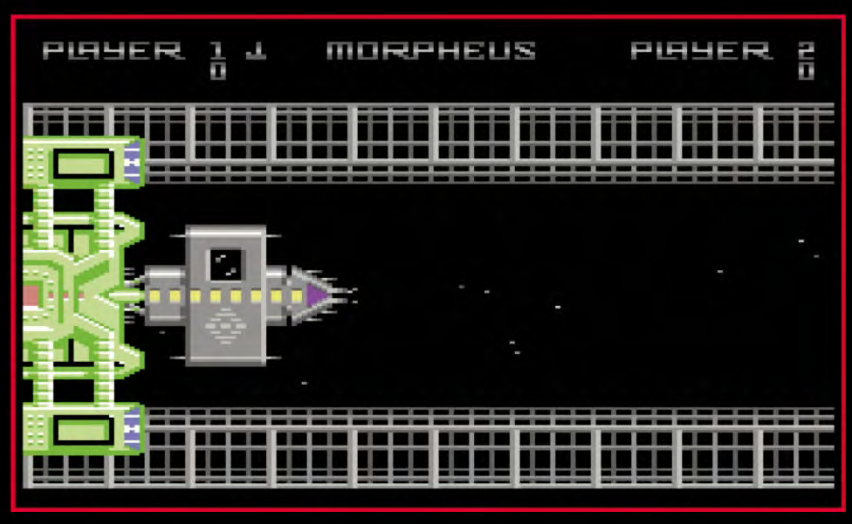


DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

PARADROID 90
SYSTEM: AMIGA, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1990

FIRE AND ICE
SYSTEM: AMIGA, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1992

URIDIUM 2 (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: AMIGA
YEAR: 1993



» [C64] *Morpheus* begins with a modestly armed, poorly shielded spacecraft ready to take off into enemy-occupied space.

MASTERING MORPHEUS

How to beat Andrew Braybrook's tactical shooter

CRUISE CONTROL

The ships available to players in *Morpheus* have differing capabilities, but they all suffer from a lack of manoeuvrability. They're certainly fast enough, but getting them to stop or change direction takes practice, and since exact positioning is required in order to hit anything it's vital that you learn how to control them.

ON THE RADAR

The stages in *Morpheus* are big open stretches of space, and there aren't many landmarks, but you need to navigate from one orbital to another. As luck would have it, nearby orbitals are displayed on your on-board radar system, as are nuclei, so finding your next target depends on keeping a constant eye on your radar display.

BOUNTY HUNTER

Your mission in *Morpheus* is strictly for the money. There's a tidy bounty on every alien you dispatch, although relatively harmless floating rocks net you far less than armed and aggressive opponents. The aliens that spill out of collapsing orbitals are worth a fair bit of cash, but the ones that dying nuclei expel are far more valuable.

ON COMMISSION

Power-ups are typically free in shoot-'em-ups, but that's not the case in *Morpheus* where upgrades have to be paid for, waited on and delivered before you can install them. Enhancements are split into system and weapon upgrades, with new guns, shields and navigation devices being introduced as you progress through the game.

SIZE MATTERS

The basic player's ship in *Morpheus* is pretty big, but it's small in comparison to the game's upgraded models. As well as being able to accommodate more system and weapons upgrades, the bigger hulls have more effective shields and plasma beams. They also have price tags to match, and they give your opponents a bigger target.

having a more complex game model where many of the add-ons were necessarily connected together. So the player got to choose a shield emitter, and then had to power it somehow. They could get a battery, but then they needed to have a solar cell to charge it."

This impressive selection of accessories would be metered out via a trading system, although a design decision resulted in the power-ups receiving slightly cryptic on-screen descriptions consisting of two letters followed by a number designating their efficiency. "The font was so big that I had to keep everything brief!" Andrew grins. "But the codes told you what you were buying. I had been playing *Rescue On Fractalus*, and couldn't detect much difference in the recovered spare parts, so I wanted to try out my own system. The later items represented developments of technology as the game stepped up, and you needed to buy the better new parts to cope with the increasing difficulty."

As well as operational upgrades such as shield and energy generators, Andrew also devised armaments to complement his game's standard weapon, including multidirectional blasters and remote drones, which additionally kept *Morpheus* pilots fit. "I imagined my system was like one person running across the ship to operate another feature," Andrew reasons. "I was trying to give the player control over movement of the ship and also movement within the ship to be able to fire better weapons on demand. So although the main weapon only fired in one direction in one place, the player could buy more flexible directional weapons that would be more effective."

Of course the weapons in *Morpheus* required targets, and so Andrew devised a race of aliens called Morphai, that rather than patrolling open space would hide in globe-shaped 'orbitals' then spill out when their hosts were attacked. "If you had seen a crowd of Morphai you might have been tempted to just wait until they pushed off," Andrew contends, "and that would have been counter-productive as time was of the essence. So for direct cause and effect it was better that the player could plan a strategy, and know when and how they were going to be attacked. So I was drawing the player to the orbitals, but they didn't know exactly what was going to happen next."

One of the biggest unknowns of attacking orbitals would be not knowing which of the many Morphai that Andrew was designing would emerge to defend their host, which due to limited screen space were fairly intelligent even in their unevolved states. "I was concerned that *Alleykat* had only had a few different enemies," Andrew admits, "so for *Morpheus* I wanted more different types of sprites with less animation frames. I could control the behaviour of them with a few bytes, so they were more economical. But at the same time, they had to be smart enough not to just crash into the player's ship, which itself occupied a lot of the screen, giving me not so many options on where they could go."

Although far from cannon fodder in their embryonic forms, Andrew felt that his game would benefit from the Morphai evolving fighting skills and immunity to weapons over time, for which he partially credits his former colleague. "Partly this was exposure to some of Steve Turner's games," Andrew reflects, "where he was getting involved in algorithms to control different races of game creatures – I didn't want to go that far, but I wanted to get the same kinds of effects and behaviour, and partly it was an incentive to keep the player buying new weapons as they become available, since they would actually need them."

Although Andrew's evolving aliens would have likely driven in-game weapons sales even if he had restricted them to orbital defence duties, the developer made sure business was brisk by deploying upgrade-destroying Morphai throughout his game. "I realised that players might be prudent to buy defensive add-ons for their small

» [C64] The main objective in *Morpheus* is taking down nuclei, which you do by collapsing orbitals.

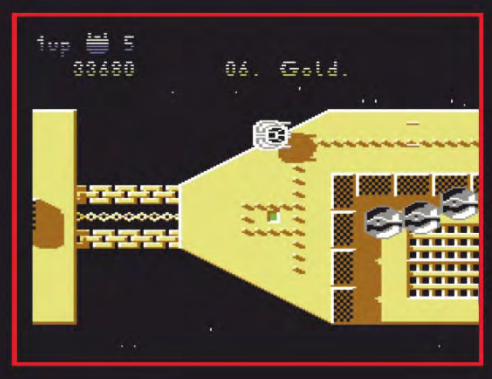
» [C64] System and weapon upgrades can be bought in *Morpheus* using funds amassed by dispatching foes.

SPACE ODYSSEY

Andrew Braybrook's sci-fi quintet

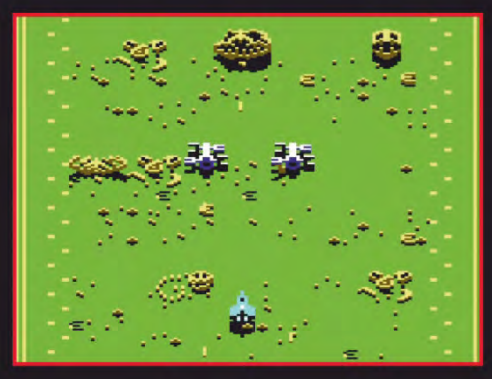
PARADROID

Like most of Andrew's C64 sci-fi titles, *Paradroid* is a top-down shooter. But it differentiates itself by allowing its droid protagonist to take control of its superior opponents with better weapons. This ingenious concept revolves around winning sub-games where you and your opposite number try to rewire each other's circuits.



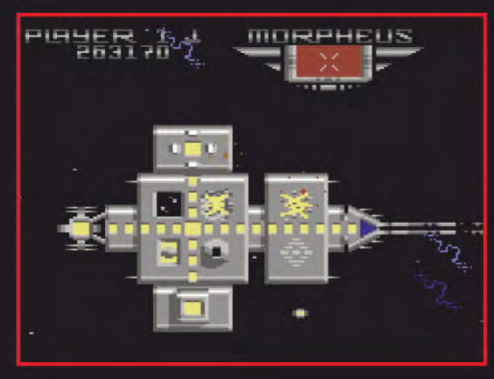
URIDIUM

Andrew's *Paradroid* follow-up is more of a pure shooter than its predecessor. That said, *Uridium*'s colourful levels are defined by their lethal raised structures, which take serious skill to avoid. But the game's main attraction lies in the speed and manoeuvrability of its Manta craft, and turning it on a dime never gets old.



ALLEYKAT

Although technically a combat racer, Andrew's *Alleykat* is more like a forced-scrolling shooter where success is based on surviving events. These are split into categories that test how fast, agile, destructive, aggressive or resilient you can be, with tougher races being pricier to enter but also paying out more prize money.



MORPHEUS

It may be Andrew's least intuitive C64 sci-fi title, but *Morpheus* represents serious replay value. For such a complex game, its objective is simple: blast orbitals to take down nuclei. Evolving foes hamper your efforts, however, and keeping them at bay requires you to collect the bounties on their heads to fund ship upgrades.

ship," Andrew recollects, "but that the add-ons could be destroyed leaving the player with no add-ons that could fire. I didn't want that to stop the player from progressing, so the main weapon needed to always be available. The more advanced weapons then needed to be better, or the player wouldn't use them."

Then for practical reasons, Andrew restricted orbital destruction to the now permanently fitted standard plasma beam while additionally allowing its use for in-flight attacks on opponents. "The point of the main weapon was that it had a fixed direction of fire, so that the joystick still controlled the ship," Andrew points out. "You couldn't easily steer the ship *and* fire the add-on weapons, as the direction of the stick then only controlled the direction of fire, so they were really just for defence."

Since weapon upgrades – as with the other accessories in *Morpheus* – had to be bought between levels, Andrew needed a way for players to raise funds, and so he decided to put bounties on the heads of his game's alien foes. "The finances were essentially supplied by collapsing the orbitals," Andrew observes, "keeping the player's mind on progression. I had been playing some board games where you could order ships, and the better ships cost more and took longer to make. That made me think about the economics of mounting a campaign. I liked that better than just *finding* items. So the add-ons in *Morpheus* became available in a set sequence at set times, allowing players to learn what was coming."

In order to time the delivery of the power-ups in *Morpheus*, Andrew devised units of time that he called timeslices, which he additionally measured players' progress against. "I was after a more fluid process than just one level after another," Andrew muses. "The timeslices controlled which add-ons became available, but also there were a fixed number of add-ons, so you had to manage their use in the time available. As the game went along, you needed to get more orbitals to collapse each zone, which took longer, especially if the layout was random or a squadron of meanies bowled up and you had to defend yourself. The Morphai would further harass a slow player, probably to the point that they got so distracted that they were delayed further!"

After finalising the last few elements of gameplay for *Morpheus*, Andrew put together an instructive title sequence as a finishing touch, but a subsequent change of publisher resulted in a court case that delayed his game's release. "We had received credible evidence that *Morpheus* was going to be released by Hewson Consultants," Andrew says with a sigh, "albeit we may have been baited, so Telecomsoft needed to act to ensure it was the rightful sole publisher. Ultimately, an out-of-court deal was done between the publishers so that we could take *Morpheus* away, and there would be a later hearing to decide how much compensation there would be, based on its sales."

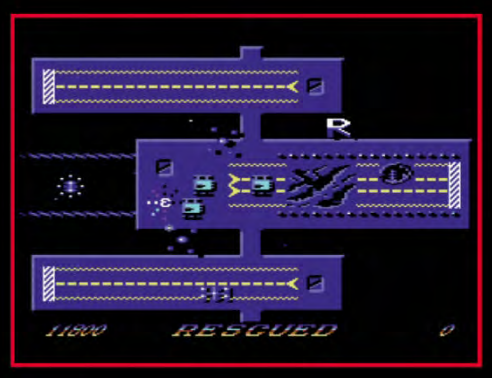
» Andrew Braybrook's *Morpheus* was the first of six Graftgold games published by Telecomsoft.

Although three months late, *Morpheus* nonetheless wowed many reviewers at the time, even if its complexity caused a few to caution players to try the game before buying it. "I wasn't really aware of any negative publicity at the time," Andrew recalls, "but of course it had lost some momentum since the 'Diary Of A Game' articles. *Morpheus* was a bit of a complicated game as regards its construction and unusual display, not being a traditional scroller, so we tried to make sure that reviewers had plenty of time to give it a thorough test."

Decades after its release, Andrew reviews *Morpheus* with pride, and concludes that for every instance that his innovative shooter falls slightly short it excels in other areas. "I think it's a bit simplistic in some aspects," Andrew concedes, "but it's quite complex in how all the add-ons interact. I had a nice three-layer parallax effect for the scaffolding at the docking station, and it melted away as you beamed out, I think that's neat. I should have used the moving star system to do more explosion bits, but I figured I had a lot of sprites so I didn't need to. *Morpheus* isn't an immediate game, but it's a toughie to beat. There's a lot of clever stuff in there, even if it doesn't have enough opportunity to show it all off." *

"I was trying to give the player control over movement of the ship and also movement within the ship to be able to fire better weapons on demand"
Andrew Braybrook

» [C64] Unlike the main weapon in *Morpheus*, the remote drone can repel attacks from all directions.



INTENSITY

The only non-scrolling, non-shooter in Andrew's C64 sci-fi series, although *Intensity* has a remote drone, upgrade ordering and evolving aliens just like *Morpheus*. *Intensity*'s drone flies to your position when summoned and rescues any nearby colonists, leaving you to collect the reward and fend off aliens with your skimmer.

THE MAKING OF DONKEY KONG™

JUMPMAN RETURNS

Thought you were king of Kong? Meet the man who monkeyed around with the original Donkey Kong to create a fantastic unofficial sequel

Words by Paul Drury

IN THE KNOW

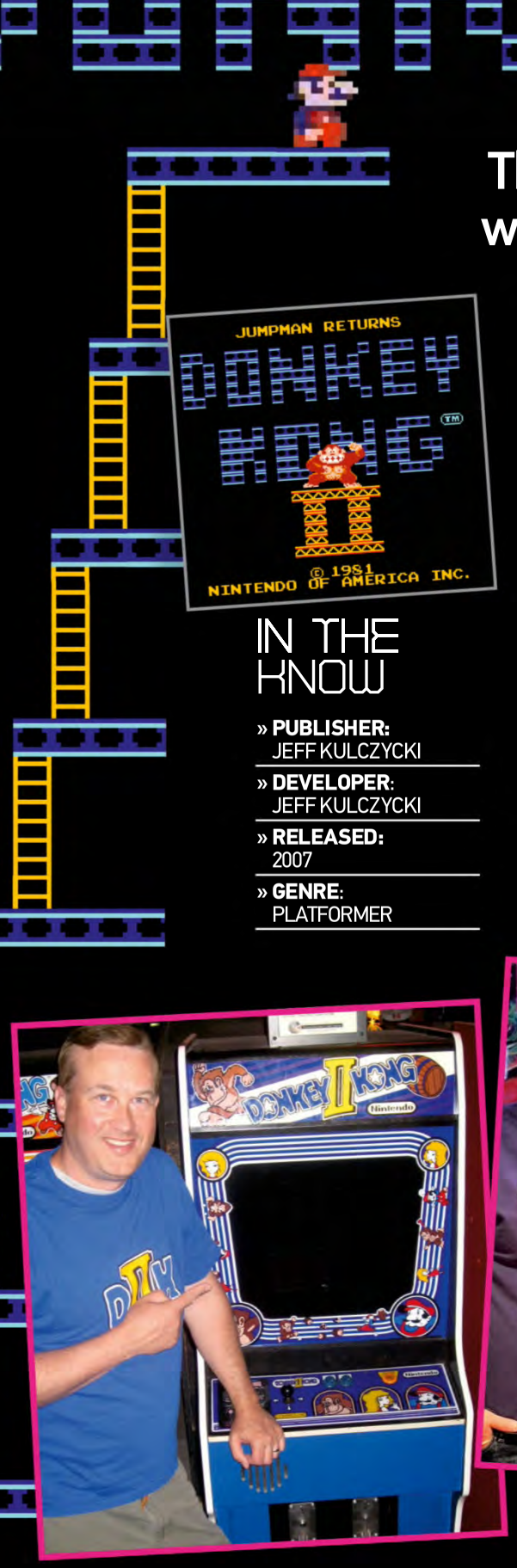
- **» PUBLISHER:** JEFF KULCZYCKI
- **» DEVELOPER:** JEFF KULCZYCKI
- **» RELEASED:** 2007
- **» GENRE:** PLATFORMER

For Jeff Kulczycki, it was always about getting high. "When I was young, I wasn't going to break any world records with my scores," he admits, "so it was about how far I could get into a game. I really enjoyed *Donkey Kong* because it had 'true' levels and asked, 'How high can you get?'"

Jeff spent many happy hours as a kid taking on Kong at his local Chuck E Cheese in Westland, Michigan, and so it wasn't a total surprise when two decades later, he started tinkering around with the original ROM of the game, initially to include a 'freeplay' mode for his machine. Then he started changing various colours and moving objects around on-screen before actually creating whole new levels for the game. What set Jeff's work apart from the plethora of 'homages' to classic arcade titles was his strict adherence to replicating the look and feel of the original *Donkey Kong*, so much so that it is easy to assume *Jumpman Returns*, or *D2K* for short, is a 'lost' sequel from 1982.

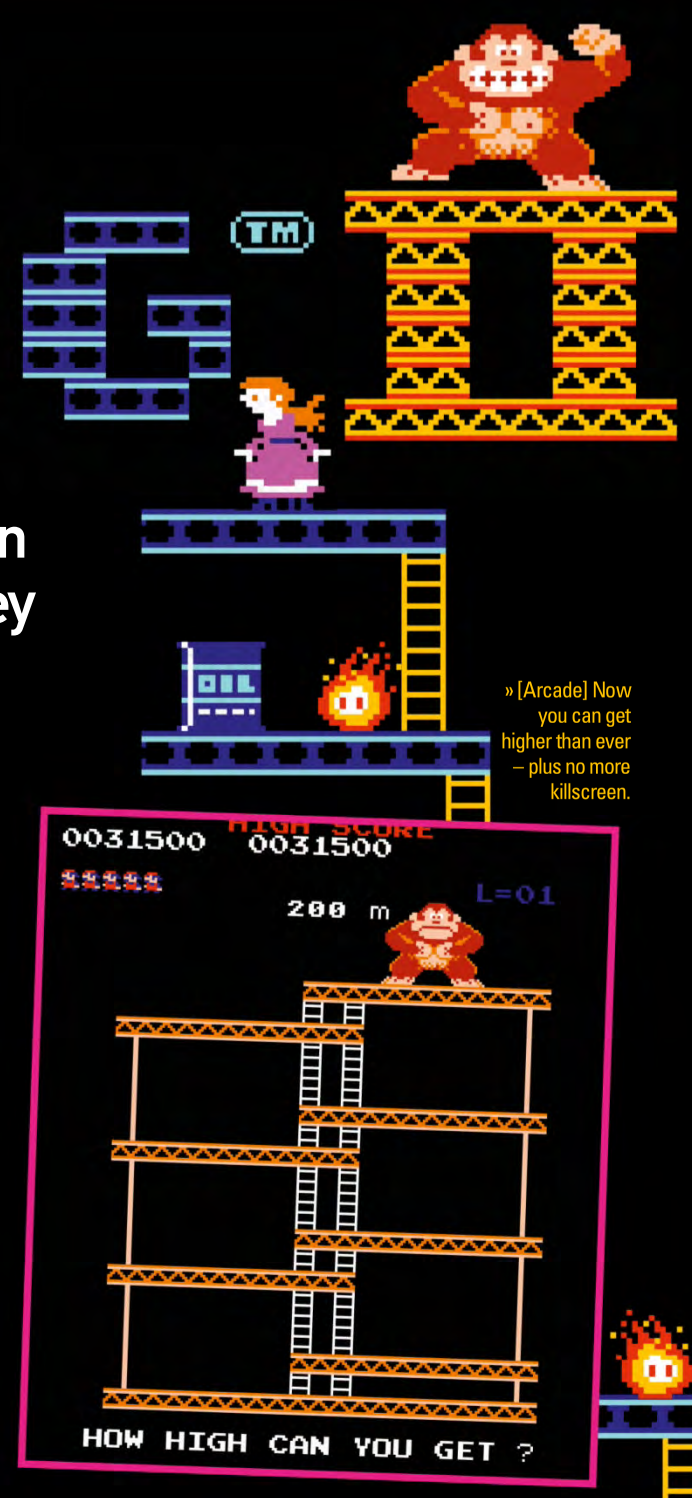
"I wanted it to feel like it came out 'back in the day'," Jeff smiles. "The game logic and physics are the same and I tried to use elements of the original in different ways, so, for example, the sideways sliders in my Foundry level are actually the up-down elevators. It means each of my four new levels still feel old."

That's not to say Jeff didn't add plenty of fresh ideas of his own into his unofficial follow-up. You will encounter horizontally moving girders, deadly electrical pulses, fireballs spewing from flaming pits and an ingenious pulley system with giant hearts as counterweights. "My favourite level is the Refinery," he says. "It takes most people a few lives to figure out what to do, but that's where the fun is at. Creating the ending of that level was a challenge for me because there were no ladders for Kong to escape with. In a flash of inspiration, I thought it would be cool to have him ▶

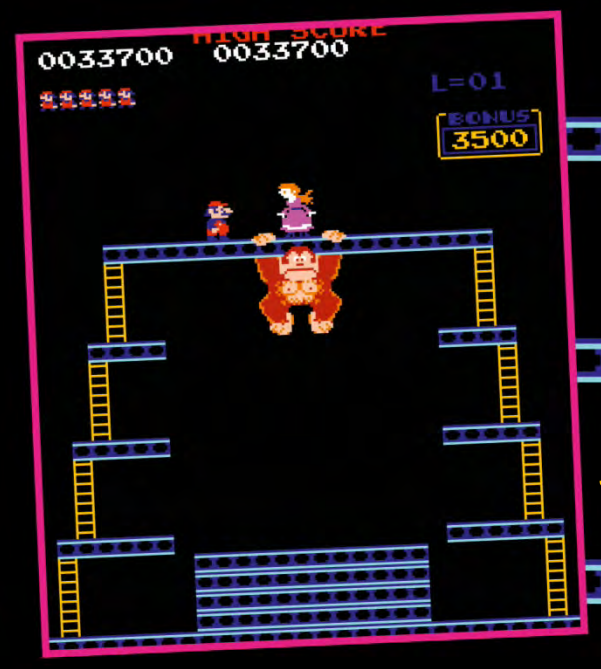


» Jeff with his baby at the American Classic Arcade Museum at Funspot.

» Tony Temple has built his own *D2K* cab and knows a thing or two about tackling the new screens.



» [Arcade] Now you can get higher than ever – plus no more killscreen.



» [Arcade] Kong begs for mercy but Jumpman goes for the fingers.

▶ do a big 'Kong Stomp' and have the lady fall down to him."

The game is full of such sweet touches and they aren't just confined to Jeff's own screens. The four original levels are mixed in with the new batch and you will notice many tweaks and additions. Some of them are pretty subtle – note how the barrels now always roll down to the bottom girder and how the oil containers can only kill you after they are ignited. Others, like having to scale the top ladder of the Pie Factory to complete the level and a third lift appearing on the elevator screen will have you doing a double-take. And you're bound to smile when Kong manages to grab hold of a girder to halt his traditional tumble at the end of the Rivets screen, only for Jumpman (the Mario moniker came later, of course) to cruelly stamp on his fingers and send him plummeting earthward once more.

"The cutscenes were just me having some fun," Jeff grins, "though they do kind of tell a story, like how Lady lost her possessions and why Jumpman has to collect them for her. You can spot some of my inspirations, too. The 'hot-foot' intermission was inspired by *Congo Bongo* and the chase scene was from *Ms Pac-Man*."

Jeff released his lovingly crafted sequel into the wild in 2007 and his timing could not have been better. The film *The King Of Kong*, which focussed on the titanic struggle between Steve Wiebe and Billy Mitchell for the *Donkey Kong* crown, came out the same year and interest in the game was at an all-time high. "The only downside to this was that there were many people who were disappointed that my game didn't lend itself well to large scores. Players were reaching a million points in *Donkey Kong* but only 35,000 in *D2K*."

Yes, Jeff's sequel is tough, and you'll realise why the default setting grants you six lives to begin with. Persevere, though, and you'll find a satisfying challenge in mastering the new screens and adjusting your strategy to beat the revamped levels you thought you knew inside out. Jeff's creativity and obvious respect for the source material is admirable and the game has been embraced by the classic gaming community. The clever folks at thisoldgame.com created bespoke cabinet art for *D2K* and many avid collectors have built their own cabs, including *Missile Command* champ Tony Temple, who provides our playing tips. You will also find a custom cabinet at the American Classic Arcade Museum at Funspot, New Hampshire, USA, where it stands proudly next to the original *Donkey Kong* and *Donkey Kong Junior*. "It's the only 'modern' game in the museum," beams Jeff. "It's humbling and in some way mortifying to see people actually gutting *Donkey Kong* cabinets to turn them into *D2Ks*."

> **"I wanted D2K to feel like it came out 'back in the day"**
> Jeff Kulczycki

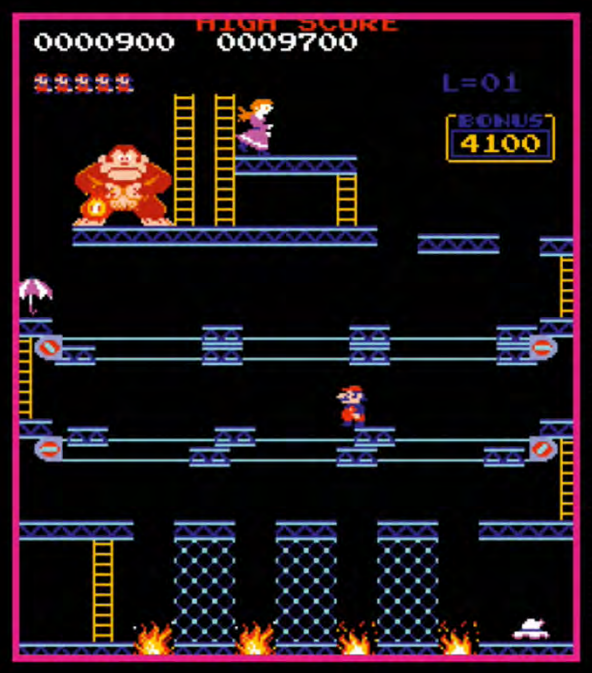
With love for the original as abundant as ever, and a new record of 1,259,000 was set by John McCurdy only this year, Jeff's sequel often pops up at Kong Off tournaments and despite its brutal difficulty, the high score has been pushed up to nearly 400,000 – says donkeykongforum.com. "I have met a lot of great people through this experience," he says. "It's always fun to give something back to the community". ✱

TONY TEMPLE HELPS YOU GO APE

MASTER THE NEW SCREENS

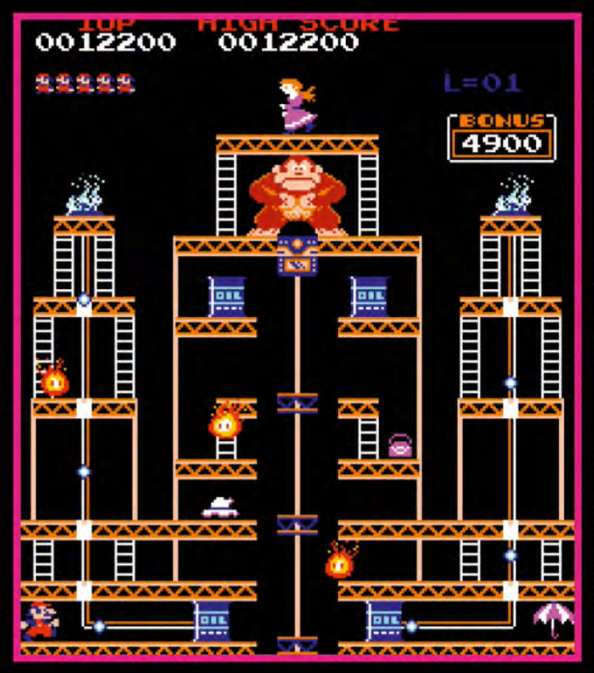
Level 1: Foundry

Before the level starts, hold right on your joystick and you'll make the series of jumps to the first ladder without issue. Ignore the hat at the bottom right of the screen. This level is all about rhythm – nail your jumps as you tackle the moving girders.



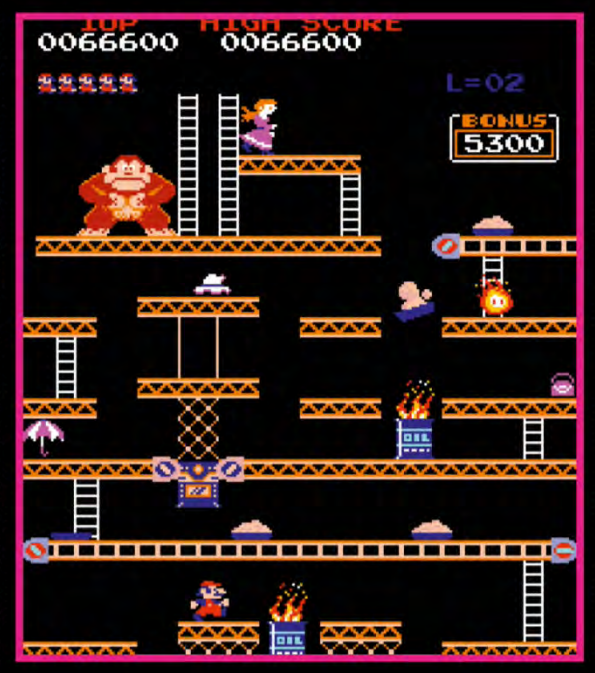
Level 2: Refinery

Start with the bottom left rivet then jump over to the right and work upwards in a zigzag pattern. The flames are predicable so watch where they go to get the space you need to move around. Keep an eye on the pulses – they move at a constant pace.



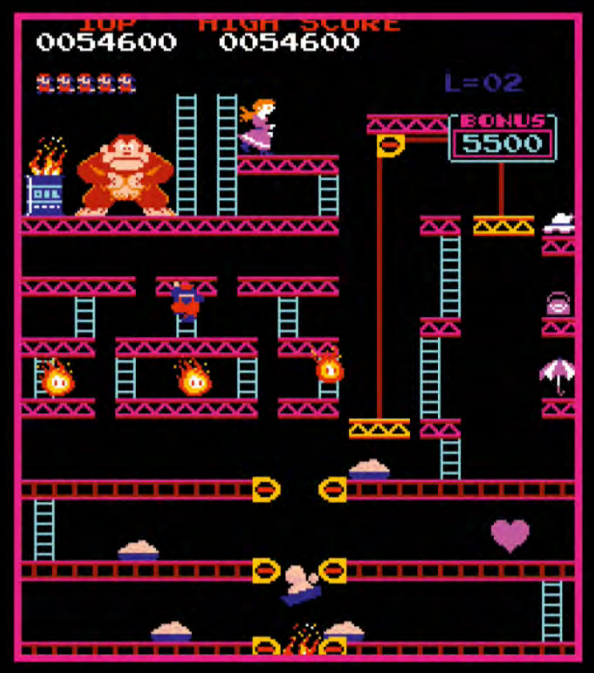
Level 3: Pie Mixer

The main challenge is the pie mixer on the first girder. Jump over the newly produced pies on the conveyor, until you get really close to the machine, then jump so you land right under the press in the 'up' position. Jump immediately to escape the next drop.



Level 4: Incinerator

This level needs practice. Collect all the hearts to counterbalance the seesaw girders. Watch out for the conveyors, especially when jumping onto one moving in the opposite direction to you. Jump again as soon as you land to escape the fiery incinerator.



For more on D2K go to jeffsromhack.com and visit Tony's classic arcade gaming blog at arcadeblogger.com

ULTIMATE GUIDE: Gemini Wing

This is our kind of coin-op. No plot, just swarms of oversized alien insects to exterminate. Retro Gamer grabs a can of bug spray and takes on the arcade shooter from Tecmo that generated a real buzz

Words by Martyn Carroll

Power-ups have always been integral to arcade shoot-'em-ups. With your tiny craft coming under relentless attack, you couldn't cut a swathe through the enemy waves using your peashooter-esque standard weapon could you? So developers introduced power-ups to readdress the balance and there have been some memorable examples. *Moon Cresta* and its docking system was an early pioneer, and this was quickly followed by *Gradius*' selectable 'Power Meter' and of course the detachable 'Force' orb from *R-Type*.

With so many shooters hitting the market in the late Eighties, it was typically innovations in power-up mechanics that set them apart. And that was precisely *Gemini Wing*'s gambit. This was a fairly typical vertically scrolling shooter in which you were pitted against hordes of invading critters over seven stages. There was differing terrain, end-of-level bosses and co-op support for two players – one blue ship, one red. It was standard stuff.

» [Arcade] The buttery-smooth parallax scrolling effect on the opening level is a visual treat.

The power-up system was pretty clever, however. The five special weapons (plus speed-ups and 1UPs) were held in floating spheres called 'gunballs'. These were released by killing certain enemies, notably The Bringer creatures who were laden with multiple gunballs. Once collected, the gunballs chained themselves to the rear of your ship like a tail of mass destruction, and they could be activated in the order they were collected. The trick was to try and save your gunballs for the gnarly, larger-than-life bosses, as trying to topple them with your puny peashooter was a tough ask. Thankfully if you did get shot down, your gunballs would scatter, giving you a brief window to gather them back up.

In another neat touch, if you had more than three gunballs, the other player could take some for their own. This was introduced to encourage sharing, but for some players (such as your average food hog in *Gauntlet*, you know the type) it was mandatory to wind up a friend by nipping in and nicking their hard-earned supplies. ▶

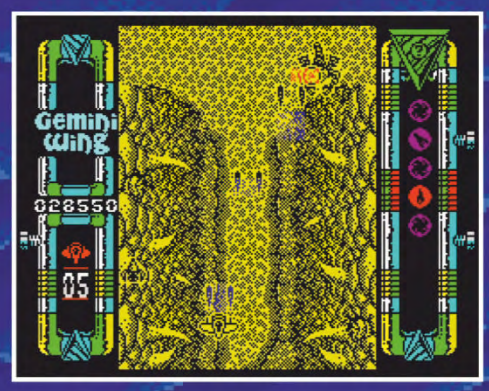
» [Arcade] Strong shades of Namco's *Xevious* here, a game that was an obvious inspiration.

CONVERSION CAPERS

Which of the home conversions was queen bee?

COMMODORE 64

Boy this version is quick, easily managing to match the frantic pace of the coin-op. The graphics lack definition but movement is smooth, and the action is underscored by fantastic in-game music from Barry Leitch. The multiload on tape is a drag, making this a stronger recommendation for disk users.

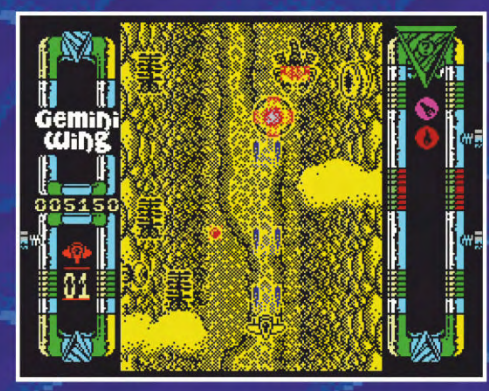


ZX SPECTRUM

The sprites and backgrounds are drab monochrome, but your shots and enemy shots are in colour so you can at least make sense of what's going on. Gunballs don't attach to your ship and are instead displayed in the panel on the right, which helps keep this decent conversion running at a decent pace.

AMSTRAD CPC

A step up over the Speccy version. The 16-colour graphics are a gaudy delight, while sprite movement and scrolling are a little on the choppy side which can lead to frustration at times – particularly as the game is challenging from the get-go. Our honest advice is to poke in unlimited lives before playing.



MSX

What can you say about a risible Spectrum port that plays much slower than the not-exactly-speedy original, features no audio bar a few fuzzy blips, and was so sloppily converted that the menu screen still includes options for 'Kempston' and 'Sinclair' joysticks? As little as possible really.

» [Arcade] Stormy weather and lightening strikes enliven the game's impressive fourth stage.

"If you had more than three gunballs, the other player could take some for their own"

That aside, the power-up system received praise in the gaming mags that reviewed new arcade releases. "On first appearances it's just another bog ordinary vertically scrolling shoot-'em-up, albeit a reasonably classy one," commented Nick Kelly in the January 1988 issue of *Commodore User*. What he felt lifted it from 'ordinary' to 'excellent' were the gunballs. "I wouldn't be surprised if *Gemini Wing* becomes a massive cult hit." Steady on, Nick (although we can see where you were coming from).

Ciaran Brennan from *Your Sinclair* also commented on the 'straightforward' gameplay, but was full of praise for the 'breathtaking' graphics. "Where this one does score is in the visual department, with stunning graphics and backgrounds that have to be seen to be believed. I can recommend this one highly, especially as a two-player game." The graphics were indeed fantastic. There were no twinkling star fields here, rather finely-detailed backgrounds that used parallax scrolling to add a sense of depth (witness the cloud cover breaking apart to reveal the canyon in the opening stage). Surprisingly the game's hardware was a modest Z80 setup, although there's clearly some clever video trickery going on. The same setup was used to power *Silkworm*, Tecmo's popular side-scrolling shooter that was released shortly after.

Gemini Wing was issued as a conversion kit for vertically orientated JAMMA cabs, so it likely replaced a dusty old game in your local arcade sometime after its debut in October 1987. Two years later Virgin Games would publish and licence *Gemini Wing* for home computers.

» [Arcade] Key to survival is The Bringer (top right), who brings you goodies like a Deliveroo driver.

» [Arcade] The game goes all *Little Shop Of Horrors* as you approach the final battle.

ATARI ST

■ The chunky graphics have a whiff of STOS about them and the in-game music is typically shrill, but this is a solid version that recreates the tense shooting gameplay of the original coin-op if not the presentation. After playing the 8-bit versions this highlights how crucial co-op play is to the game.

AMIGA

■ The screenshots tell a thousand words here. This is obviously an ST port, and the sprites and use of colour are identical. As usual, the scrolling is slightly smoother, and the main difference is the soundtrack which benefits from added samples (check out the thunder and lightning effects at the beginning).

SHARP X68000

■ Pretty much unobtainable to western gamers at the time, this is the best version by an absolute mile. It appears 100 per cent accurate to the original and, unlike the other versions, there's a separate button for unleashing your power-ups. A bunch of configuration options round off this fine conversion.

For the conversion job Virgin commissioned Yorkshire-based Imagitec Design to develop versions for the ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and Commodore 64, as well as the Amiga and Atari ST. Imagitec was best known for developing *Bloody Valley* and *Butcher Hill* for Gremlin, plus bits of undistinguished conversion work for various publishers. Despite its less than stellar record, the Imagitec team delivered decent versions for all platforms. The September 1989 issue of *The Games Machine* magazine rounded up all of the versions (bar the CPC release which missed the deadline), giving 62% to the C64, 69% to the Spectrum and 71% to both the ST and Amiga. Reviewer Mark Caswell summarised that it was "one of the better examples" in the current crop of arcade conversions.

The 8-bit versions were all single-player – although a preview of the C64 game in *Zzap!64* issue 52 reveals that it initially featured co-op play, with screenshot evidence, but it was dropped for some reason (the mag later awarded the solo experience 65%). Thankfully the 16-bit versions did support two players, but none of the versions attempted to recreate the parallax scrolling from the arcade, which led to some unfavourable comparisons with the recently released and all-round excellent *Xenon 2: Megablast*.

We don't know how the full-price release sold, but we can get a decent idea of its popularity by looking at the published sales figures for its budget re-release on the Mastertronic Plus label. Across all formats it sold 36,000 copies, which is actually quite low for a budget title (for comparison *Silkworm*, that other Tecmo shooter which was also licensed by Virgin Games, sold 135,000 copies when issued on Mastertronic Plus). If you were wondering about the format split for the budget re-release of *Gemini Wing*, it was C64 34%, CPC 23%, Spectrum 20%, Amiga 15%, and ST 8%.

The game was later released on two further platforms. The MSX received a very lazy port of the Spectrum version which was an embarrassment in the face of the Konami and Compile shooters available for the system. Far superior was the Sharp X68000 version which was converted by Sacom and released in 1990. As you would expect from this powerful system the version was arcade perfect – parallax scrolling and all.

And that was it for *Gemini Wing*. There were no console versions, and more surprising still it hasn't been included on any retro compilation. You'd have thought it would have been a shoe-in for the 11-game *Tecmo Classic Arcade* collection released for Xbox in 2005, but no, it wasn't included. And neither was *Silkworm*, yet *Swimmer* and *Senjyo* were. Strange.

Gemini Wing isn't a forgotten title but it's clearly one that's fallen between the cracks. What better excuse to dig it out and revisit it now, particularly if you're partial to a little bug blasting? Just don't be stealing our gunballs, pal. ✱

» [Amiga] Sadly no parallax scrolling effect is employed, although it's still a decent conversion.

POWER-UP LOWDOWN

IF YOU'RE GOING TO SURVIVE YOU'LL NEED TO POWER-UP

THREE-WAY SHOT

Probably the most common power-up in the game. It fires three deadly blasts: one straight ahead and two at 45-degree angles.

HOMING MISSILES

Fires off a series of rockets that lock onto nearby enemies. Definitely a power-up to ration for tough boss encounters.

WIDE BEAM

Like a smart bomb. A screen-wide flame races upwards, killing everything in its path. Perfect for crowd control.

SWINGING FIRE BAR

AKA the 'Windscreen Wiper Of Death' (according to a home version inlay). It emits a lethal, flamethrower-like jet.

SPARK HURRICANE

Unleashing spinning orbs of energy that radiate up and outwards, dealing heavy damage. Save this one for the bosses.

SPEED-UP

The proverbial power-up. Use one to go faster, and another to go faster still. One is probably enough actually.

EXTRA LIFE

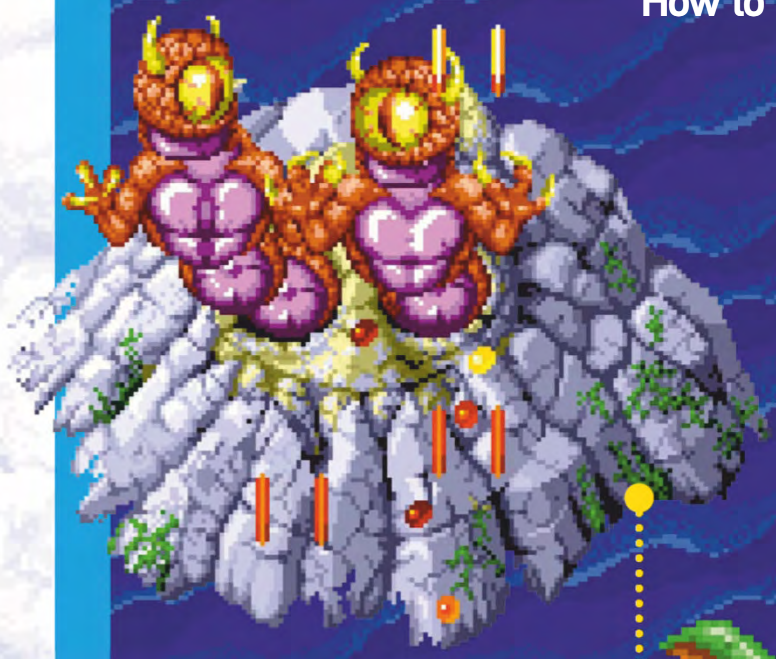
Far from common, but 1UPs do appear on occasion. In two-player games, who will be the first one to grab it?

BONUS POINTS

Boosts your score with 20,000, 50,000 or 100,000 bonus points. Nice, but not worth risking a life for.

BOSS RUSH

How to tame the game's end-of-level guardians.



TWIN WORMIES

The laser-spitting worms from the game's cover art lie in wait at the end of stage two. Their movement appears unpredictable but it's based on your position on the screen.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

Their laser attack is lethal, so try and draw that then move out of the way at the last second. Focus your fire on one worm before targeting the remaining one.

FLOATING GROWTH

This ugly 'thing' emerges from the ocean and floats around the screen, firing multiple small shots. Its weak spot is its, err, orifice which appears occasionally and spits out fireballs.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

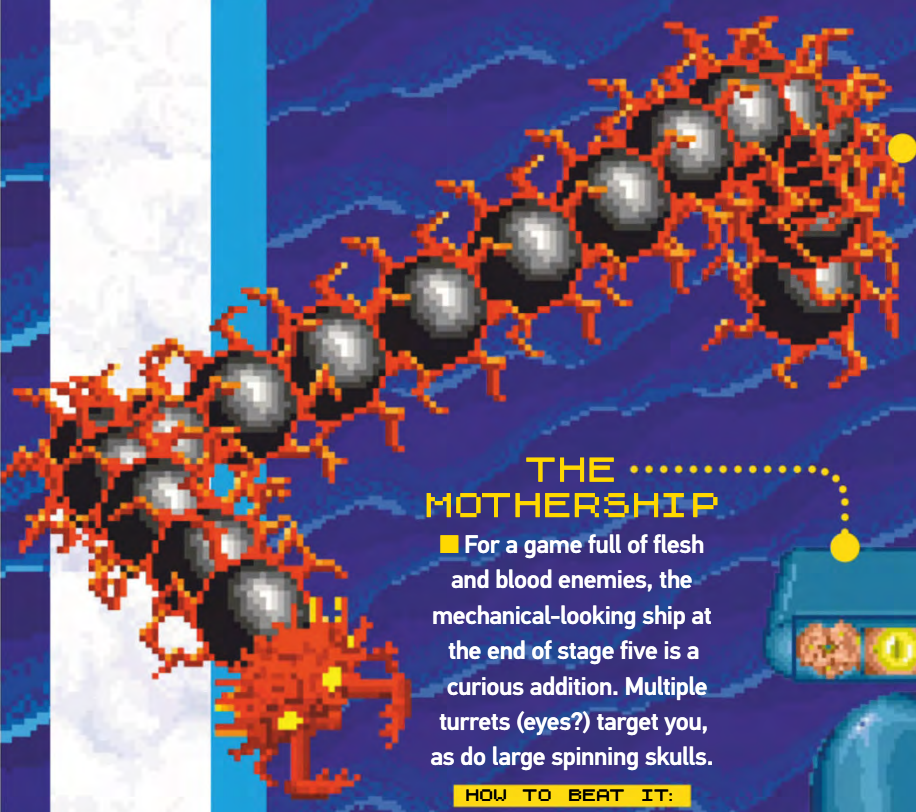
That opening is its weak spot. When it appears, unleash a sphere straight up its exhaust port. Homing missiles are effective, as is the three-way shot if you're close to it.

GIANT WALRUS

This dapper marine mammal leaps from the waterfall and moves left and right, firing deadly bubbles from its mouth. Occasionally it will dive down and take cover beneath the water.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

It is entirely possible to destroy this boss using your standard weapon, as it's easy to avoid his spread attack. Only use power-ups to speed things along.

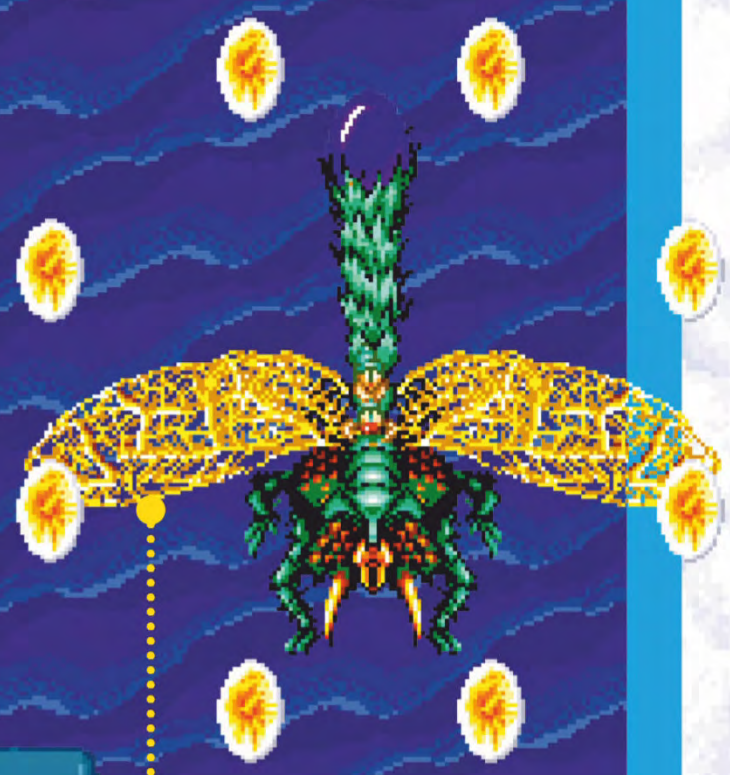


KING CENTIPEDE

This creepy crawly scuttles around his domain, often disappearing into hidey holes before emerging elsewhere. It doesn't actually fire stuff, preferring to crush you with its body.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

Don't waste time shooting its body. Its head is its only weak point, so wait for it to emerge and target it with power-ups. Homing missiles work nicely here.



THE MOTHERSHIP

For a game full of flesh and blood enemies, the mechanical-looking ship at the end of stage five is a curious addition. Multiple turrets (eyes?) target you, as do large spinning skulls.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

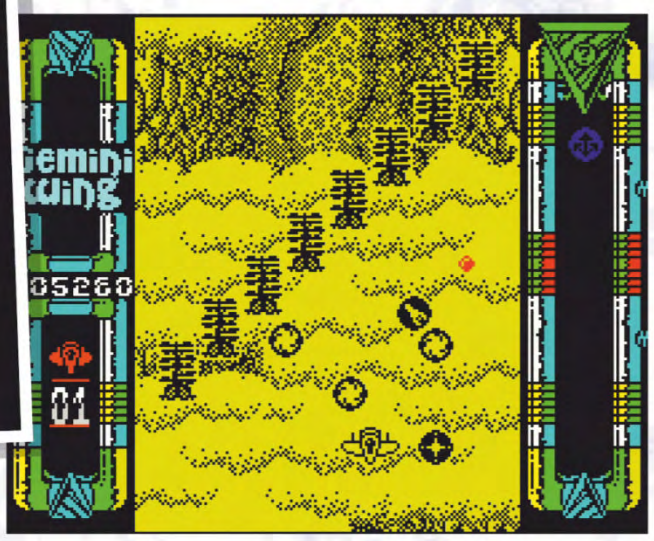
Forget the skulls – you just need to destroy the eight turrets on the ship's wings. Concentrate your fire here, and use power-ups like the awesome wide beam.

EMPEROR DRAGONFLY

The final boss lives up to its billing. It fills most of the screen, making it difficult to manoeuvre in its lair, and targets you with twin shots and rapid energy rings.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

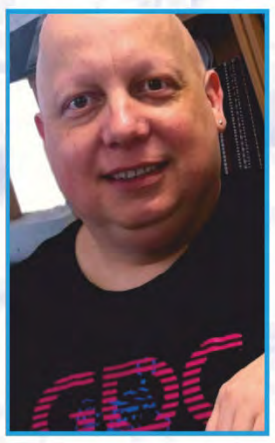
Shooting its head is useless. You need to target its abdomen when it's exposed, and this can only be done using gunballs. You stored up a bunch, right?



» [ZX Spectrum] Gavin: "I now have ideas for how I might be able to approach a faster framerate, at least on certain versions of the Spectrum."

Q&A: GAVIN WADE

We chat to the coder of the Spectrum and Amstrad CPC versions for Imagitec



How did you land the job of converting *Gemini Wing*?
The short version would be that our small team of developers, comprising Chris Edwards (artist), Barry Leitch (music and SFX), Tom Pinnock (C64 programmer) and myself (programmer/producer) found ourselves starving in an overpriced bedsit near Catford in London. A white van and a rapid overnight departure propelled us up the M1 to Ravensthorpe in Yorkshire. *Gemini Wing* was the first game we did for Imagitec.

Did you feel daunted by the task of converting such a busy shooter?
No, not at all. Because Chris and I had worked on several games together already we just went into autopilot and did our usual things. So we knew we'd need the side panels to both shape the vertical playing area of the original arcade machine and also reduce the performance demands on the poor Speccy, as we hit a performance issue with the power-ups as the tail of the ship. We wanted to use that performance time to draw the baddies and everything else in the game, so we made the choice very early on to use the right panel to 'list' the tail items.

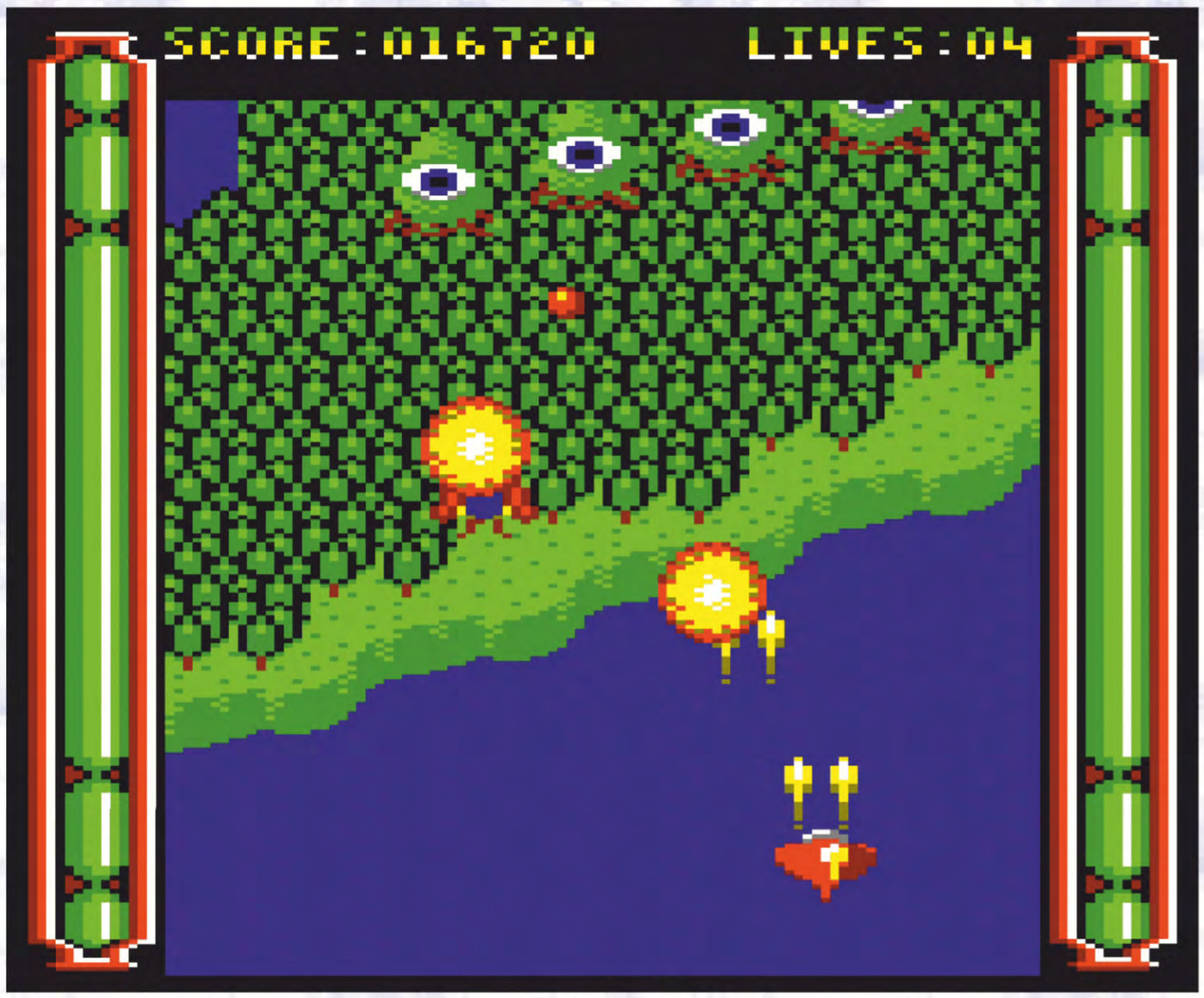
Did you have access to the coin-op machine during development?
Yes, that's all we had. Everything in the conversions had to be recreated from playing the original arcade game, making notes, then recreating the content. So yes, that's hundreds of playthroughs of the arcade machine, which was okay. It was research!

What was your opinion on the coin-op?
I think at first glance the impression wasn't all that great, another vertical-scrolling shooter. But once you started playing, and became aware of the benefits of the various power-up types, it became more about managing and not losing the tail items. This made it pleasingly different to other arcade games I played around that time.

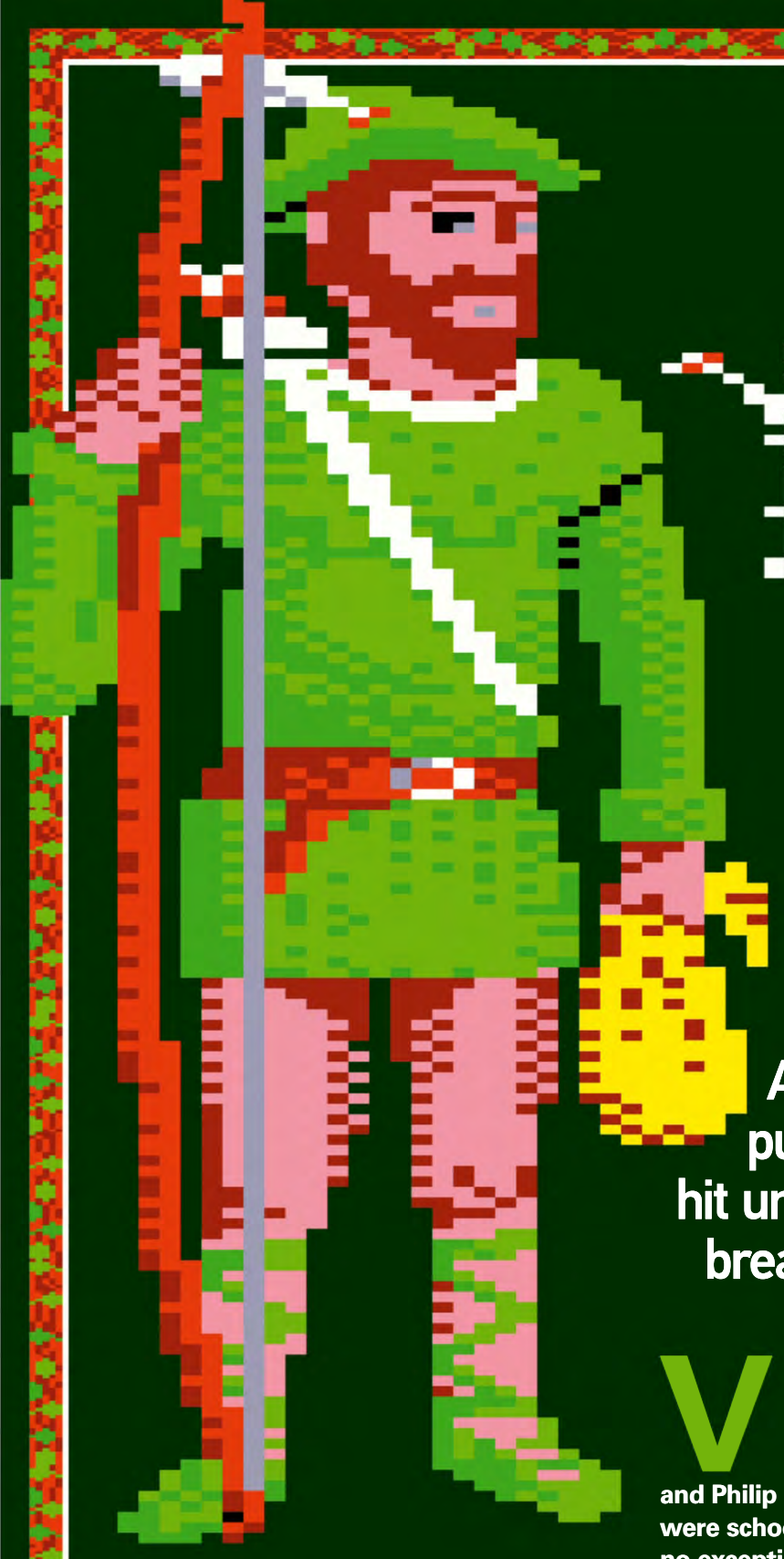
Was there a lead version?
We were most familiar with the Spectrum so that always came first. Generally anything unknown would be addressed first, to eliminate potential problems later in development, then we'd just get on with whatever was needed.

If you had the chance to revisit the game again now would you do anything differently?
There are things I would have done slightly differently in the presentation of the Spectrum version – better colour contrast on some of the maps, possibly wider masking on some of the sprites to help them pop out over the detailed backgrounds.

Anything else you would like to share about the development period?
I clearly recall the shock Imagitec had over all the versions being completed on time. That had never happened before, so a party in a local pub was arranged to celebrate this achievement. It had seemed perfectly normal to me that projects should be completed on time, but if it pleased them then that was great.



» [Amstrad CPC] "Looking back at the Amstrad version, it's surprising to be reminded of implementing something so vivid colour-wise compared to the Speccy," says Gavin.



THE MAKING OF SUPER ROBIN HOOD

Although Philip and Andrew Oliver had several games published while still at school, they didn't have their first hit until after they had left. Philip explains how they made their breakthrough with the budget platformer Super Robin Hood

Words by Rory Milne

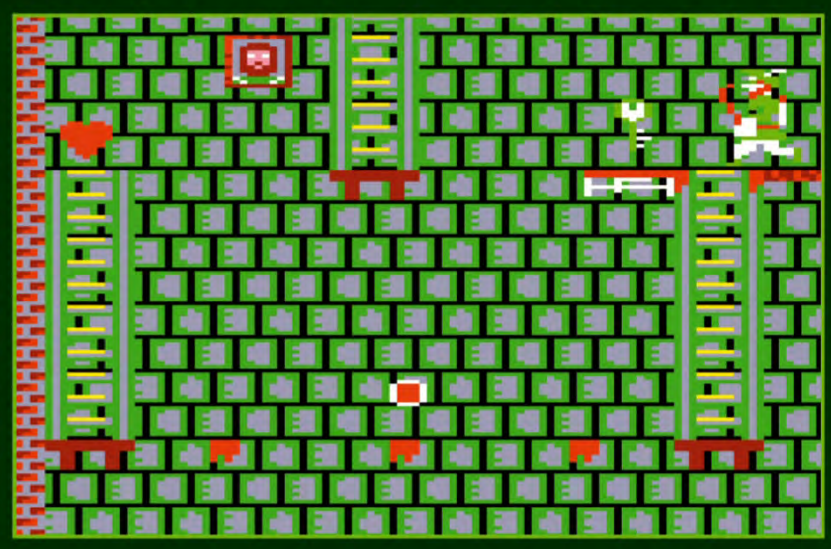
Very few games developers of the Eighties became overnight sensations, and Philip and Andrew Oliver – who were schoolboys at the time – were no exception. So after almost two years of making BBC Micro games with little financial reward, the twins switched to the Amstrad CPC 464 and subsequently decided to focus on the budget market, as Philip explains. "We were trying to get full-price games released on the Amstrad, and to be honest they weren't very good, so the next route was to go budget price," Philip admits. "We did some games with Players, which weren't brilliant, but every game got a bit better. Then we got to the summer holidays, where we either had to go to university or earn enough money to *not* go to university."

Preferring to follow their dreams rather than furthering their educations, the brothers drew up plans for an ambitious full-price variant of Atari's *Gauntlet*, but after failing to secure a contract, the pair hurriedly put together a simpler pitch. "We decided that we would quickly bang out another budget game, and went along to a [trade] show in Hammersmith, where we met the Darling [brothers]," Philip says of meeting the founders of Codemasters Software. "We asked them how much they would pay if we made the game for them, which we knew we could write in a month or so, and they made an offer of £10,000. We were like, 'Whoa!'"

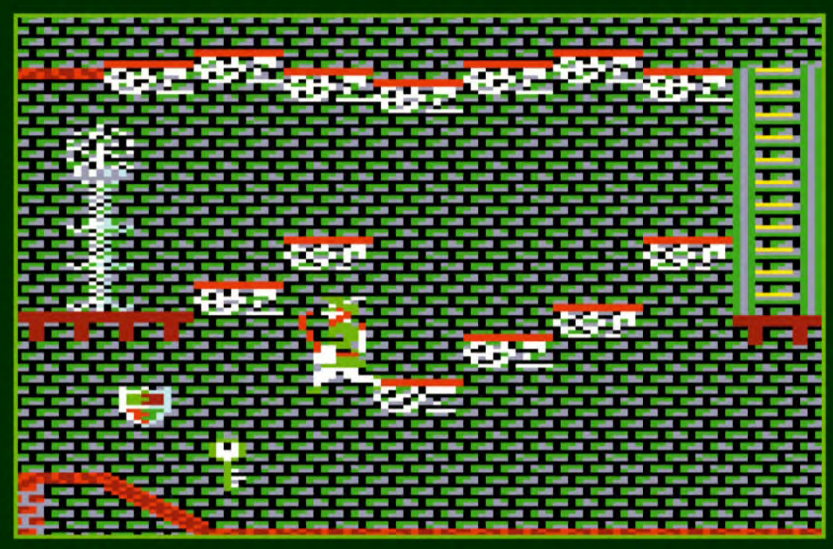
Without hesitation, the Olivers accepted the publisher's offer for their proposed budget title, which Philip remembers taking inspiration from their favourite platformers. "The BBC had a few games that influenced us," Philip recalls. "There was *Monsters* – where you were going up and down ladders shovelling, and *Chuckie Egg*. We loved the idea of a side-on platform game, but when we looked at these abstract platformers we decided to theme ours more."

IN THE KNOW

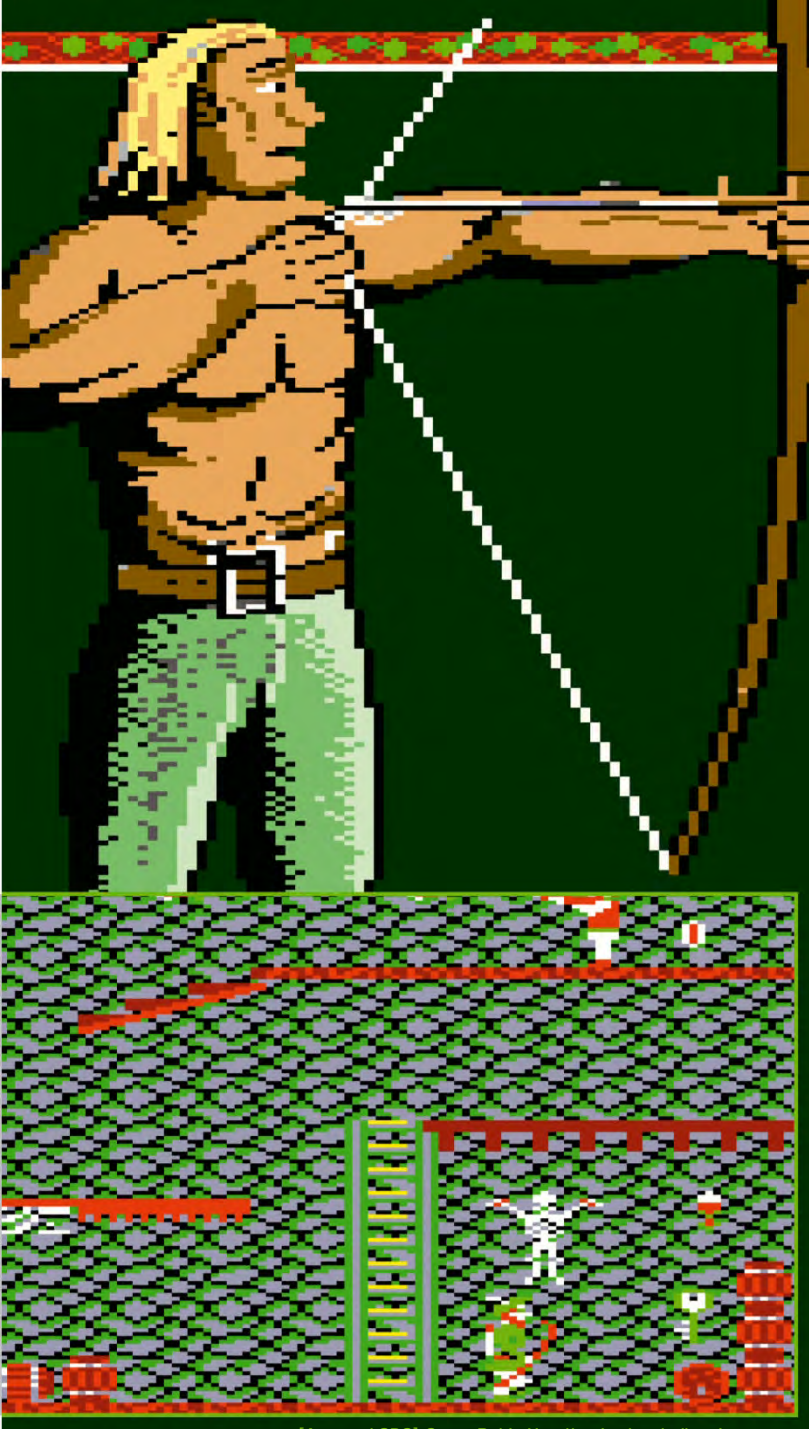
- **PUBLISHER:** CODEMASTERS
- **DEVELOPER:** PHILIP AND ANDREW OLIVER
- **RELEASED:** 1985
- **PLATFORM:** AMSTRAD CPC
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER



» [Amstrad CPC] Extremely skilful platforming is required to collect every last heart in *Super Robin Hood*.



» [Amstrad CPC] Some hazards in *Super Robin Hood* really drain your health if you mistime your jumps over them.



» [Amstrad CPC] *Super Robin Hood* begins by challenging you to collect a key then dispatch an armed guard.

» Philip and Andrew Oliver got ten number ones in the UK sales charts while working for Codemasters.

More specifically, the Oliver twins opted to base their platformer around the legend of Robin Hood, and his story's medieval setting. "The best classic stories were all set in medieval times," Philip reflects, "and Robin Hood was just one of those characters that was always around. So we combined ladders and platforms with the themes of Robin Hood and castles, and it all just made sense."

In order to introduce exploration into their game, Philip and Andrew decided to allow players to move freely between stages rather than progressing from level to level. "It was just a lot more interesting if you weren't going forward all the time," Philip reasons, "and if you had to go back again you got a lot more gameplay. We loved maze games, and effectively we were making a maze out of a platform game."

When it came to designing the castle that Robin Hood had to storm, the brothers tended towards realism while making concessions to platforming standards. "We had dungeons, ladders, and stuff like that," remembers Philip. "Obviously we also had things like moving elevators, but those were the mechanics of a platform game. You needed things that you could turn on and off – and you can't turn ladders on and off!"

A second concession to sensible gameplay followed, in the form of a health meter designed to keep fatalities to a minimum. "Back in those days, touching anything dangerous usually meant you lost a life," Philip notes, "so losing health was a compromise. It also gave you the mechanic of topping the health up again, and that introduced some interesting pick-ups. Because the game was about exploring nooks and crannies, and there was no point if there was nothing there."

» [Amstrad CPC] After securing all of the hearts in *Super Robin Hood* you can set Maid Marion free.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

GHOST HUNTERS
SYSTEM: AMSTRAD CPC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1986

DIZZY
SYSTEM: AMSTRAD CPC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1987

FANTASY WORLD DIZZY
(PICTURED)
SYSTEM: AMSTRAD CPC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1989

Although simply titled '*Robin Hood*' in-game, the Olivers' budget title was promoted as '*Super Robin Hood*' on its release, and Philip reckons it was as profitable as it would have been at full-price. "I think we probably got the same money; we just sold four times as many at a quarter of the cost. *Super Robin Hood* was hugely successful, and in the long run probably got us £20,000."

Assessing *Super Robin Hood* with hindsight, Philip offers little in the way of changes, and his final thoughts reflect his obvious satisfaction with the challenging platformer. "It could have been a little slicker," the developer concedes, "but I quite like its timing puzzles, it's nice that you can learn the sequences so that the more times that you do them the further you get. I'm very proud of it, because for us it was a big step in the right direction, and we achieved a lot in a month."

CONVERSION CAPERS

Amstrad CPC

◆ The first thing you notice about the Olivers' Amstrad original is the amount of thought put into their game's level design. Its stages are certainly tough in places, but once you work out the timing and positioning required by their hazards and platforming challenges then it becomes a joy to play. In terms of aesthetics, the game boasts a skilfully animated main character, nicely rendered backdrops, a suitably jolly soundtrack and impressive speech samples throughout.

ZX Spectrum

◆ The 16-colour visuals of the Amstrad original were never going to be perfectly replicated in this adaptation, but, to be fair, its less colourful graphics are depicted in a higher resolution. The version of *Super Robin Hood* developed for the Spectrum also lacks the three-channel audio and speech of its Amstrad counterpart. Less forgivable, however, is this conversion's flickery animation and the fact that jumping even the smallest of distances can drain valuable health.

C64

◆ The Commodore 64 *Super Robin Hood* could have been a lot better. Its pre and post-game presentation is excellent; there's some really nice music and a pair of striking full-screen visuals, but the game itself is disappointing. Its oversized stages span multiple screens, and so they scroll, rather than flicking from one to another, which means that you get little warning of upcoming dangers. Its levels are also sparse and identically coloured, which turns exploration into a chore.

KLAXES
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02

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Klax

THERE IS TIME, BUT NO REASON

» AMSTRAD GX4000 » 1990 » DOMARK

Not too long ago, I was at an event doing some interviews for this very magazine, when I came across a selection of retro consoles set up for the enjoyment of visitors. Most of them were occupied by happy players, but there was one machine looking a little lonely – a GX4000. Now, Amstrad's attempt at cracking the console market might not have gone so well, but for it to be ignored when it's sitting there to be played at no cost? That was a little sad, especially since it was playing *Klax*.

Of course I couldn't resist sitting down and playing a game or two, because falling block puzzle games are my particular vice. And hey, it's a good conversion too. Admittedly it would be hard to mess *Klax* up, but given that my most-played version is the rather snazzy Mega Drive one, I didn't feel like I was missing out on too much. I got pretty into it, and for a moment I was even thinking, "You know, I should have a look on eBay when I get home."

And then, as I so often do with GX4000 games, I thought again. Do I really need *Klax* for the GX4000? Probably not – after all, *Pang* is a good conversion but I already have a good conversion of that game (the excellent PC Engine CD one, if you're wondering). *Plotting* is a good conversion, but I already have a good home version of that, too, this time via *Taito Legends* on PS2. And since I've got the Mega Drive version of *Klax*, there's really no point in me picking up the GX4000 version. I'm sure I'll eventually add to my tiny haul of GX4000 games, but when I do it'll be a game like *RoboCop 2* that finally pushes me over the edge. You know, I should have a look on eBay…

Black Legend

It was a dark time for the Amiga but a company set up as the machine's life entered extra time proved to be rather legendary with scores of games released – including a football title that looked ever so familiar…

Words by David Crookes

According to *Amiga Format* in June 1993, fans of Commodore's celebrated follow-up to the Commodore 64 had millions of reasons to be cheerful. The Amiga had sold 3.8 million units across Europe, including 1.5 million machines in the UK alone. Sales topped 700,000 in North America and 350,000 in Australia and New Zealand.

Perfect timing, then, for a new software publisher to emerge, you would imagine. Only the figures didn't quite tell the full story. In April that same year, another magazine – *Computer Gaming World* – suggested the Amiga was "hardly mentioned, let alone seen" at the European Computer Trade Show in London. Yet here was Black Legend, hoping the appetite for Amiga gaming was still alive and well.

Black Legend had been founded in 1992 by a 20-year-old called Richard M Holmes who lived in Switzerland. He was interested in the Amiga demo scene and began working with developers on a handful of games when Steven Bailey, from a games distribution company called Kompart, paid a visit and suggested a partnership.

» [Amiga] *Logic* was a fun, 3D version of *Connect 4* designed by Ivan Sardsacz of the developer Muffbusters.

It felt like a great match. Kompart had worked with top-name publishers such as Domark and Activision and it had distribution relationships spread across the continent from Russia to Scandinavia. Richard saw an ideal opportunity to push Black Legend's games to a wide audience so, by August 1993, he joined Steve and his business partner, Duncan Lowthian as a joint, third director and Black Legend's games were readied for launch.

"These were the early days of east European development and there were loads of talented programmers and artists emerging," Richard says, of the post-Soviet scene. "With Kompart, we had everything we needed in place, from production to distribution, PR and marketing so it was a case of doing the same work with Black Legend but with our own brand in place. It worked fine because we didn't have to start from scratch."

Black Legend decided early on that it would target the Amiga first and foremost while dabbling with other formats such as the PC. It had released four games before Christmas 1993 with the most memorable being *Fatman: The Caped Consumer*, for the Amiga and DOS – a gloriously juvenile collect-'em-up platformer with a burping main character created by I/O Product in Hungary that had a beautiful animated intro and colourful in-game graphics.

This was joined by a poorly received compilation of Russian-based games called *Moscow Nights* for

» [Amiga] There were lots of bloated gags related to being overweight in *Fatman – The Caped Consumer.*

PC, and *Hyperion*, a low-budget mouse-controlled game of ten missions for the Amiga developed by a Norwegian team called Offence Software. The latter was described by *Amiga Power* as "little more than a collection of ingenious 3D routines roughly formed into a game" but, with another compilation called *Hungary For Fun* (including *Kid Pool* and the puzzlers *Logic* and *Zarcan*), Black Legend was up and running.

By gambling on little-known enthusiasts such as Offence Software, Richard was unearthing and publishing talent from the vast pool of Amiga fanatics. Some of them worked part-time and needed to arrange time off their day jobs to finish a game, but Black Legend was helping to foster an alternative coding scene and it entered its second year with confidence.

Indeed, Richard had two games up his sleeve which he was confident would do well. One was the superb football management simulator, *Tactical Manager*, developed for the Amiga, Atari ST and PC by Camy Maertens of Talking Birds in Rayleigh, England. The other was *Football Glory* for the Amiga and DOS which hit the back of the net with reviewers who not only scored it highly but compared it favourably to *Sensible Soccer*.

Tactical Manager allowed up to 46 players to simultaneously compete to be as successful as they could and it reached number one in the UK game charts. *Football Glory* had a familiar top-down view complete with tiny sprites but its fluidity and speed was especially eye-catching and it added lots of fun quirks from grass that would scuff during a sliding tackle to overhead and heel kicks.

There was even action involving spectators as streakers took to the pitch and police officers chased hooligans who would chuck firecrackers and toilet paper. With different choices of pitch, zoomed replays, speech bubbles and different physics for the ball depending on the surface played, it really did feel like a labour of love.

"*Football Glory* was all about creating a fun football game that was better than *MicroProse Soccer*," says Richard. "So we had the streakers and the injured people carried off on a stretcher and little celebration dances and things like that which meant every time you played, it was a game to remember – unless you were playing it all the time in which case it became an accepted part of the fun. I'd spent some time trying to find the right developers for it and came across Croteam. They did a damned good job."

Croteam was – and still is – a games developer based in Zagreb, Croatia, and *Football Glory* was the studio's first title. It originally created the game for the Amiga and followed up with a version for PC. Development, however, wasn't easy. "We had this bizarre setup where I was living in London and they were working programming hours. So I would talk to them 24 hours a day, making some quick decisions for ten minutes every hour and then going back to sleep for 50 minutes," Richard laughs. "It was a bit on the hectic side but it worked."

» [Amiga] *Football Glory* looked remarkably similar to *Sensible Soccer* but it was still cup-winning stuff.

» [Amiga] *Leading Lap* had lovely flourishes, such as the driver's head turning during cornering.

» [Amiga] Influenced by Microprose classics such as *Colonization, Voyages Of Discovery* was a successful trading sim providing hours of gameplay.

GERMANY CALLING

■ As well as having a base in the UK, Black Legend also had an office in Mülheim An Der Ruhr in Germany, headed up by former Blue Byte staff. The games and their boxes would be localised and Richard M Holmes would spend time in both countries, ensuring the company as a whole ran smoothly.

"We'd ship to Germany from the UK and I was the one doing deals with German distributors," Richard explains. "When I was 21, I sold a million quid's worth of software in one day. That was nice!" Sales certainly boomed.

Indeed, the German side of the business was so successful, it continued running for a little longer than the UK part. It published Digital X-citement's little-known sci-fi isometric RTS game *Colony Wars 2492* on PC and *Indoor Football Glory* in 1996 but closed shortly afterwards.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Richard M Holmes

■ After Black Legend closed, Richard became the European product manager for Eidos for a short spell and he then founded another games developer and publisher called IncaGold. The company specialised in mass-market PC titles such as *Midnight Racing*, *Autobahn Racing*, *RollerCoaster Mania 2* and *Tombstone 1882*. The company relocated from Switzerland to the Isle Of Man in 2003 before floating IncaGold on the London Stock Exchange's Alternative Investment Market. He resigned in 2009 and founded another videogame company called Play Sunshine with offices in the UK and Romania. He went on to run an internet marketing company developing games, apps and marketplaces for brands. Richard is now CEO and founder of Lolly, a location-based brand discovery system working with the world's biggest brands and media agencies.

Jamie Barber

■ Jamie worked for GT Interactive before moving to The Bitmap Brothers where he lead the design of games such as *Z: Steel Soldiers* and *WW2: Frontline Command*. A few years after becoming creative director, he moved to Nice Tech as a designer and producer of online games and became head of QA at Universally Speaking. Following a lengthy spell as game director and development manager of nDreams, he moved to Dubit, a kids research and digital studio.

Rather than follow it up, Black Legend sought to sample different genres. "Unfortunately, we felt we had done a football title and so we began to think of doing something else instead of constantly doing the same thing," says Richard. "It meant that *Football Glory* wouldn't become like a fun *FIFA* and run on for years which, in hindsight, was maybe a mistake."

The publisher satiated gamers instead with a host of games that included *Embryo, Tactical Manager Italia, Statix, Crystal Dragon, Mega Motion* and more. "During the development of these, we were posting floppy discs from one country to another, with us offering feedback and them showing their progress," recalls Richard. "The couriers made a lot of money."

Statix, developed by 7th Sign Production, was a compelling falling block, tile-matching puzzle game involving a seesaw which players tried to balance by avoiding an overload of either side. *Mega Motion* by Extend Design was another puzzler in a similar vein to *E-Motion* that saw gamers using a mouse to move rotating balls towards an exit. Magnetic Fields' *Crystal Dragon* was an RPG tasking players with reaching a magic crystal that would allow power over the universe before an evil sorcerer got his hands on it.

"Development teams would generally come to us with something in place and we'd work from there," says Richard. "But I wish we had known at the time stuff that we learned later. Today, you would never release a game called '*Embryo*', for instance, no matter what it was about [Black Legend's *Embryo* was a 3D first-person shooter by Croatian developer Beyond Arts]. It would just be an expensive brand to create whereas *Football Glory* does what it says on the tin. Quite often we'd have developers turning up with things that needed a market and we had to get people to know about it, which wasn't always easy."

Luckily Black Legend had good relationships with the magazines ("I'm still friends with a bunch of the journalists and I haven't been in games for quite a few years now," Richard says). He'd allow the publications to carry demos of Black Legends games on their cover discs and he'd physically travel to showcase products. "It was a small industry and relationships were important," he affirms. "So I'd drive to Bath to see the Future Publishing guys, then to Macclesfield for Europress and over to London for EMAP. In Germany, I'd be travelling to Munich and Cologne. Quite odd when I think back."

Some of those games did incredibly well. While sales could be as low as 1,500 units, it would achieve 80,000 to 100,000 for its bestsellers. Even so, it was loathe to jump to console game development (the CD32 aside) because of the costs involved. "The *7th Guest* on CD-ROM in 1993 was enough of a concern because Virgin chucked a million at it," Richard says. "The transition from floppy disc on the Amiga to CD on the PC and PlayStation was a big scary transition for anybody, least of all us."

Even so, 1995 proved as productive as previous years. *Tactical Manager 2* was released, again developed by Talking Birds, while Poland-based Ego created the *Doom*-like shooter *Behind The Iron Gate* which was as close to id Software's classic as the A500 was going to get – a tremendous feat given they'd never worked on a commercial release before.

"Each level was monochromatic but it was a genuine *Doom*-style game so while the guy with his Mac was playing Bungie's first titles on a rig that cost a few grand, we were having equal fun playing on the Amiga," says Jamie Barber, who began working at Black Legend as a tester before getting involved in marketing.

Parys Technografx created the isometric RPG *Tower Of Souls* and there was a great buzz around the racing game *Wheelspin* for the A1200 which Jamie recalls with fondness. "I took a call when all of the senior staff were out and I talked the developer through the process of submitting a game for Richard," he says. "I came up with the name *Wheelspin* and I also persuaded the sales guy to approach Yokohama for some in-game advertising so this was before that scene had all kicked off."

Certainly by now, Black Legend had gained a positive reputation. It published *Sid Meier's*

THE DNA OF BLACK LEGEND

COMMODORE AMIGA

■ The majority of Black Legend's games were created for the Amiga and the company proved loyal to Commodore's machine. As Richard M Holmes says, "It was a damn good system and it was a lovely, simple machine to work with compared to what else was out there." There were, however, some PC titles and *Tactical Manager* made an appearance on the Atari ST.

EUROPEAN DEVELOPERS

■ Black Legend worked with a good number of development teams based on the continent, and it struck up a particularly strong relationship with Croteam in Croatia – a newly created development team founded by six friends which still exists today. Most of Black Legend's games were developed in mainland Europe, drawing on talent from multiple countries.

FOOTBALL GAMES

■ *Football Glory* and *Tactical Manager* were Black Legend's biggest successes both in terms of sales and critical acclaim. Black Legend also published *Five-A-Side Soccer* on the Amiga and *Tactical Manager Italia*, although *Tactical Manager 2* was less well received. Croteam, which developed *Football Glory*, released the game as freeware in 1998.

"It was a shame but when Commodore went bust, the whole market collapsed"
Richard M Holmes

Civilization for the AGA Amigas on behalf of MicroProse and it released the superbly drawn trading sim *Voyages Of Discovery* by Software 2000. But although Black Legend had a grip on the Amiga market – "A couple of years later, I did some work on *The Chaos Engine* for The Bitmap Brothers and there wasn't a huge difference between then, tech-wise," Jamie says – the PlayStation was dominating and the Amiga's days looked numbered. Then again, it had been for a while.

Commodore had experienced a rocky couple of years due to problems with the A500+ and PC games sales were performing far better, seeing allegiances switch. The A1200 with its new AGA chipset was acclaimed but publishers were deserting the Amiga and not even the CD32 was able to save it. Little did anyone know at the time but the A4000T in 1994 would be the last Amiga produced.

» [PC] What are the odds on remembering all the clubs Barry Fry managed? Here, in *Tactical Manager,* he was helming Birmingham City.

As 1995 went on, it became ever more clear the market wasn't what it was and the guys behind Kompart felt it was time to close Black Legends. It was, in some ways, a bit of a shock since, at the European Computer Trade Show in March 1995, which attracted a record number of visitors, Black Legend was proud to be showcasing a good number of games. That it was only joined by Team17 and Renegade in supporting the Amiga, however, was a sure sign of things to come.

"We had an office in Germany which lasted a little longer but that was it for us," Richard says, of the moment one of the biggest late supporters of Amiga games disappeared from the scene. "It was a shame but when Commodore went bust, the whole market collapsed and it's amazing how an installed user base becomes worthless in some situations.

"But we had great fun during three very intense yet special years and some of those games pushed the Amiga really hard. That was particularly satisfying because it's still my all-time favourite machine."

» [PC] *Inordinate Desire* was a turn-based strategy game that involved conquering far-flung planets.

» [Amiga] *Wheelspin* wasn't really ready for market when it was released so it didn't quite beat rival *Skidmarks* to the chequered flag.

» [Amiga] Following the launch of *Doom,* many developers rushed to produce clones and Black Legend's was *Behind The Iron Gate.*

TIMELINE

1992 ■ Black Legend is founded in Switzerland.

1993 ■ The company relocates its office to St Albans, Hertfordshire, England.

■ The team releases *Fatman*, *Moscow Nights*, *Hyperion* and *Hungary For Fun.*

1994 ■ Black Legend signs Croteam to work on *Football Glory.*

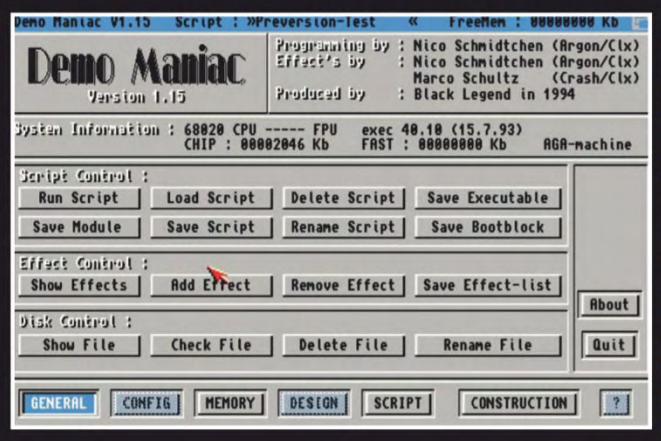
■ Another office move takes place, this time to Welwyn, Hertfordshire, England.

■ Black Legend releases *Football Glory*, *Mega Motion*, *Exploration*, *Crystal Dragon*, *Statix*, *Tactical Manager*, *Tactical Manager Italia* and *Embryo.*

■ A German division is established with former Blue Byte staff.

1995 ■ *Citadel* is released, alongside *Tower Of Souls*, *Behind The Iron Gate*, *Tactical Manager 2*, *Wheelspin*, *Inordinate Desire*, *Five-A-Side Soccer* and *Demo Maniac.*

1996 ■ Black Legend closes its UK office, with the German office following suit.



DEMO SCENE

■ The Amiga had a thriving demo scene and Black Legend tapped into its talent. One deal that fell through was *Shenandoah: Daughter Of The Stars* by four teenage demo sceners from Sweden. Black Legend had them featured in UK magazines but the team split shortly after. Black Legend also published *Demo Maniac* for 'lamers' to produce video demonstrations.

MASS DISTRIBUTION

■ Since Black Legend was part of the distribution company Kompart, it was, in effect, a ready-made publisher with all of the infrastructure needed to get big box games into the shops. The publisher would also make appearances at shows such as the European Computer Trade Show, and it became one of a handful of companies supporting the Amiga when many left it behind.

RAINBOW ISLANDS

Conversions of Bubble Bobble proved a huge hit for the home micros, and it was somewhat inevitable Rainbow Islands would follow suit with ports of its own. Retro Gamer spoke to Gary Foreman about his excellent Commodore 64 conversion

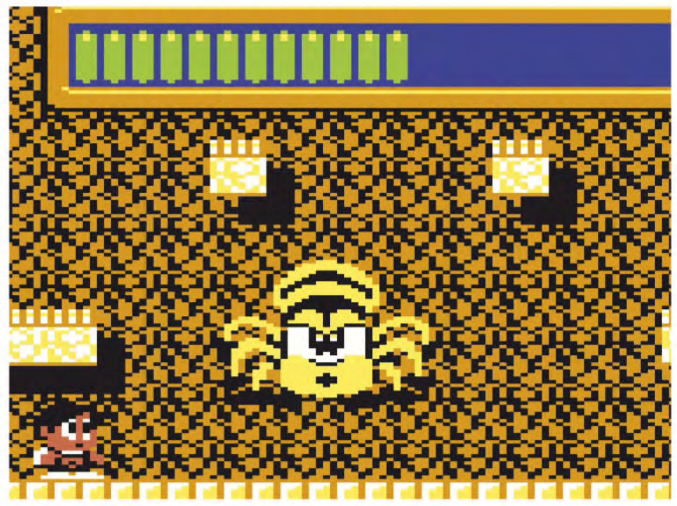
Words by Paul Davies

INFO

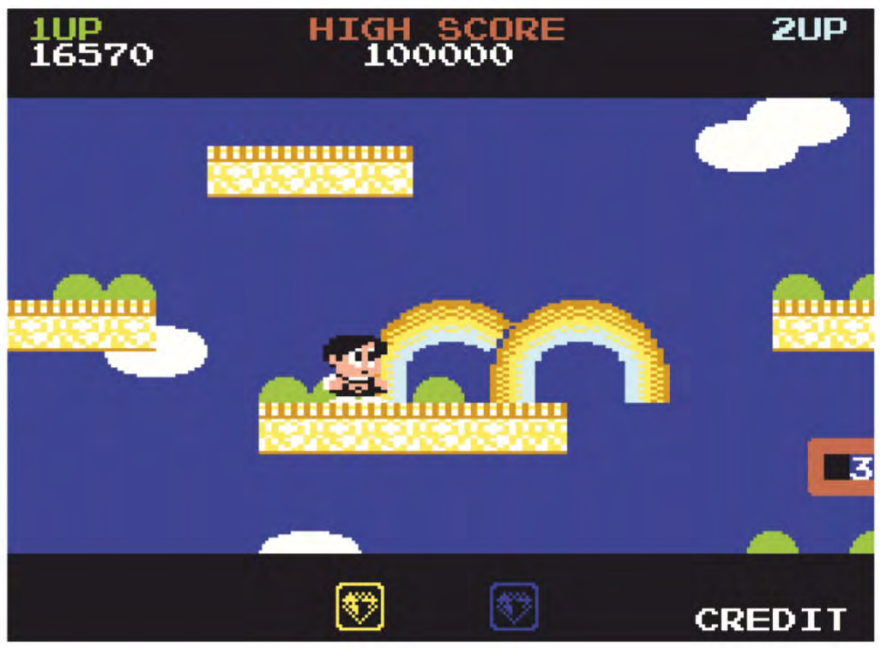
- **» ARCADE RELEASE:** 1987
- **» COMMODORE 64 RELEASE:** 1989
- **» CONVERSION TEAM:** GARY FOREMAN
- **» AVERAGE SCORE:** 92%

In late 1986 and Gary had just taken on the job of porting Graftgold's *Ranarama* to the Commodore 64, which started his affiliation with the developer. Later he joined the team full-time in 1988, with Graftgold taking on the licence for *Rainbow Islands* not long after. With the company now in charge of creating all ports to 8-bit and 16-bit home computers, it assembled a team of programmers to take on each version. Working collectively on the project, each member was given their own specific home computer versions to work on. "The *Rainbow Islands* team consisted of most of the company at the time. Andrew Braybrook was working on the Amiga and Atari ST versions, David O'Connor took on the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad, and I was tasked with the Commodore 64 version," says Gary. "I recall we also had additional support from John Cumming, who was responsible for the art and Jason Page did most of the audio."

Given a six-month turnaround to complete the project, the team set to work, and, as is the case with most conversions, Graftgold was given an original arcade machine to help with development. But this time it was given something a little extra to help in its quest. Gary explains, "I remember we received a binder from the publisher, which had a lot of gameplay-related references and diagrams which explained the enemy movements and their progression etc. Though the majority of material was diagrams, there were also elements of text included, but quite a bit of it was in Japanese, given that Taito was the original developer – though there was nothing that we couldn't understand." Gary continues, "We also received a few floppy disks containing the original graphics – this coupled with the arcade machine, is how we put the pieces together, if you will."



» [C64] There's not a glass big enough to catch this spider.

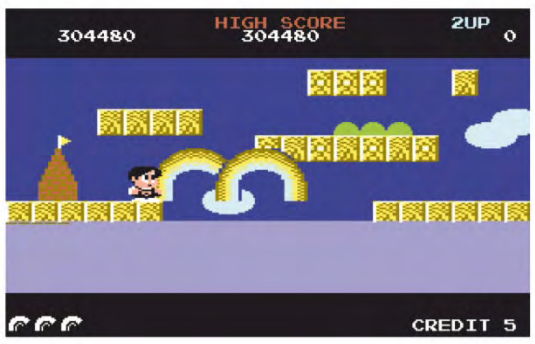


» [C64] One of the trickiest parts of the conversion turned out to be the rainbows. Here we see two of them. Wow!

According to Gary, the best way to "fully understand the game" was to "play the hell out of it", so who would be given this pain-staking, though essential, job for the development? "Andrew [Braybrook] and David [O'Connor] were very good at the game so they were given that job," he says. "I have to say that it's only because they were so good at it, that we found out that there were three secret islands." Unfortunately for all 8-bit versions, these could not be included due to memory limitations, though Gary explains he did manage to include everything else in his Commodore 64 incarnation. This included the game's rendition of *Somewhere Over The Rainbow* which may or may not have been good news, depending on where you stand on that element of the game. It definitely divided opinion but what mattered was that Gary was happy with his take on the tune, stating that even though it was criticised in reviews, he thought it was a faithful tribute. That said, there was a rumour that the speaker of the original arcade cabinet had to be disconnected after a while during development.

Challenges are inevitable during conversions of this type, so what was the main issue that he encountered in completing his version of this arcade classic? With the secret islands already having to be omitted, Gary set about working out how to fit the rest of the game into the memory. Having a team working together on all of the home versions had its benefits, with each member bringing their own skills and tricks to the table, having a hand in resolving problems each version may have come across. Gary recalls, "The biggest problem was how to fit all of the backgrounds in; this is where Andrew and David devised a compression algorithm which made the background maps significantly smaller. I don't recall what percentage or actual sizes, but do remember that it was impressive." Talking of dealing with his own Commodore 64 version, "My problems were how to display the gems at the bottom of the screen and how to do the water that crept up at the end of each level, though the biggest challenge of all was the rainbows: especially when you get the special pickup where you're firing three at a time!" Gary elaborates, "Because of the hardware sprite limit and how they could be multiplexed, the rainbows had to be made out of characters, and that meant the colours would have to change from level to level. I was fairly pleased with how the rainbows worked out. It's not ideal, and far from perfect, but given the hardware limitations I feel that it works well."

Without Taito supplying its folder of diagrams, the conversion would have been a bigger task than it ultimately turned out



» [C64] Time to dust off those swimming trunks.

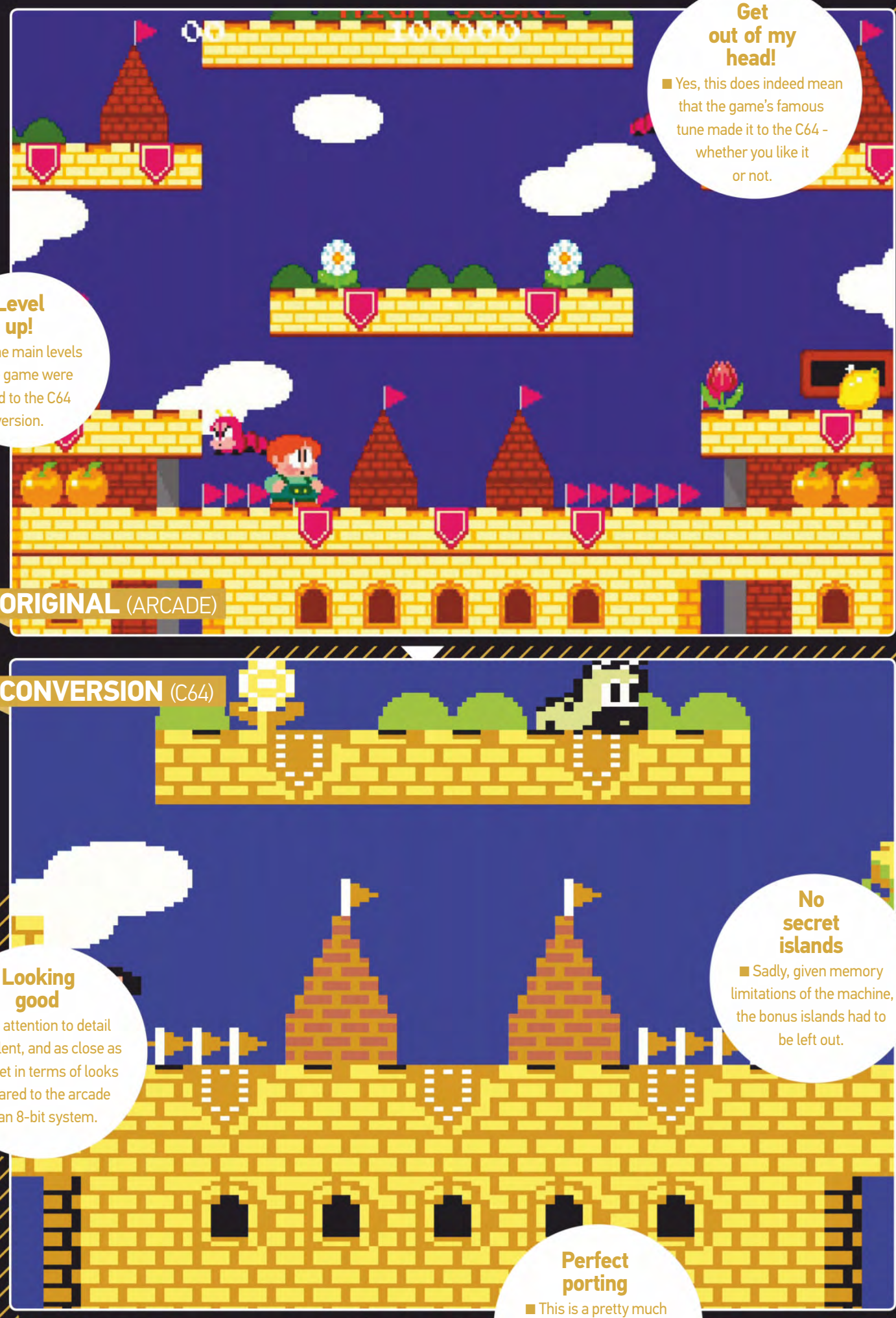
» [C64] How can you smile at a time like this, Mr Plane?

to be. Gary believes that the additional help from Taito was the stepping stone the team needed to set the home versions on their way. He explains, "I'm not sure how we would have approached it otherwise [without the binder], though having the same team work on all versions was a big plus. Working alongside Andrew and David was definitely a benefit and meant that when some of the problems were solved, they were solved for all versions of the game."

The final product is one of the fondest games remembered for the Commodore 64, especially in terms of platformers, gaining high scores in magazines at the time and becoming a fan favourite – something which Gary is proud of. *Rainbow Islands* is a near perfect conversion, the same could be said for many of the other home computer versions of the game, but the Commodore 64 port is what a lot of fans state to be best. With the game achieving high accolades, it may be a trivial question to task, but is there anything Gary would have changed if the hands of time could be turned back? "In terms of doing things differently, I'm not sure that I would," he says. "If I could go back to the code, I could probably make some improvements here and there but nothing major. I personally see it as my best C64 work and, pound for pound, I believe that it's one of the better arcade ports out there."

Well Gary, who are we to disagree?

HOW ACCURATE IS IT?



Get out of my head!
■ Yes, this does indeed mean that the game's famous tune made it to the C64 – whether you like it or not.

Level up!
■ All the main levels of the game were added to the C64 version.

Looking good
■ The attention to detail is excellent, and as close as you'll get in terms of looks compared to the arcade on an 8-bit system.

No secret islands
■ Sadly, given memory limitations of the machine, the bonus islands had to be left out.

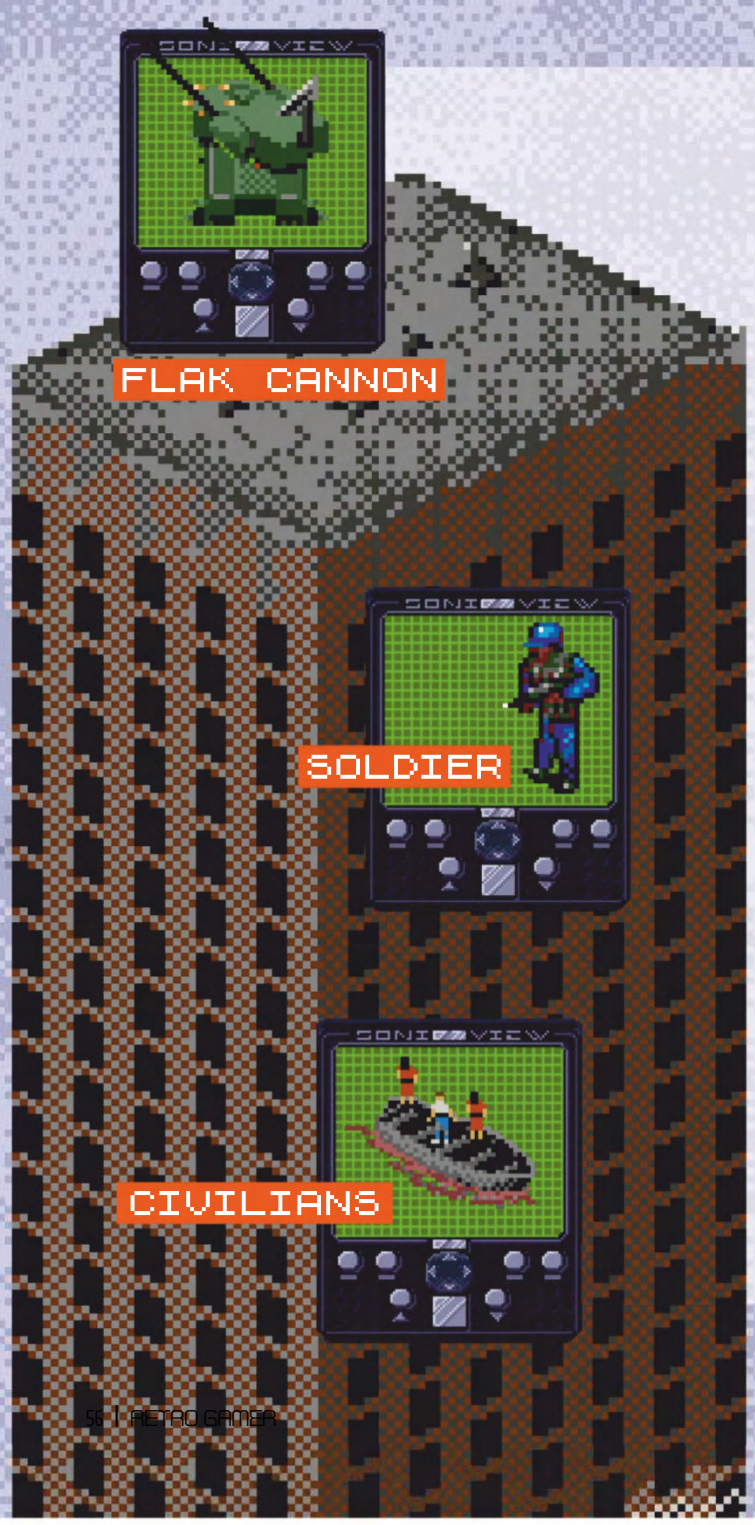
Perfect porting
■ This is a pretty much faultless game, as far as conversions go – you'll struggle to find better on the C64.

ULTIMATE GUIDE:

URBAN STRIKE

We spin-up the blades one more time to revisit the final 16-bit entry in the Strike series and discuss its attempts to bring a fresh approach to the franchise's strategic helicopter combat

Words by Paul Walker-Emig



After successful forays into the desert and jungle in 1992 and 1993, *Strike* series mainstays John Manley and Mike Posehn took their helicopter shooter series to the city for 1994 Mega Drive entry, *Urban Strike*. Though it featured a couple of missions harking back to its two predecessors, the idea was that the game would take us on a whirlwind tour across America, stopping off in San Francisco, New York and Las Vegas.

The game reintroduces us to a foe from *Jungle Strike*, Carlos Ortega, who is now operating under the alias of HR Malone. Malone is a millionaire politician using thinly veiled fascist rhetoric who promises to "take back America". Huh. Doesn't that sound kind of familiar? Anyway, Malone is actually building a secret super-weapon and it's your job to stop him.

As with the previous entries in the *Strike* series, *Urban Strike* is an isometric helicopter shoot-'em-up with a strategic angle. Each mission sets you loose in a sandbox map with a series of objectives to complete: rescuing civilians, destroying enemy positions, obtaining and delivering key items with your helicopter's winch and so on. The idea is that, for the most part, you can choose to tackle the objectives in any order you like. The game requires you to think carefully about the order in which you approach these missions and how you navigate between them by virtue of the resources you need to manage – you need to keep an eye on your fuel to make sure you don't strand yourself too far from a refill and think about which objectives are likely going to require ammo and armour refills.

Before you head into battle, you can tweak your approach by selecting a copilot. The default pilots don't differ that substantially, but there are MIA pilots that can be rescued through the course of the game. Rescue Stinger in the games second mission, for example, and you'll immediately notice a huge difference in your rate of fire and accuracy and see what a difference a good copilot can make.

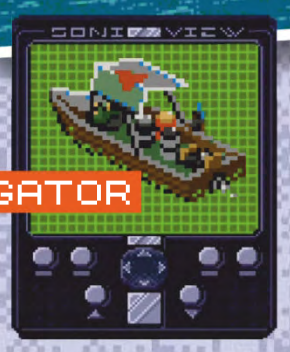
Your main helicopter is the Mohican, which is what you'll be using for most objectives that require any kind of combat. Its relatively vulnerability is offset by the craft's agility and powerful weaponry – it comes armed with a machine gun, Hydra rockets and Hellfire missiles. Soldiers can easily be taken out with your machine gun, but tougher enemies such as anti-aircraft positions, armoured vehicles and planes will usually require at least a few rockets to ensure you take them down before they do too much damage to you. There is the option to switch to another helicopter in some missions: the Blackhawk. This craft has more armour but is far more sluggish and doesn't carry any Hellfire missiles. Thanks to a large carrying capacity, it's best employed for rescue missions, preventing you from having to ferry your passengers back and forth and wasting fuel as a result. Finally, in the game's third mission in Mexico, you can also enjoy the novelty of

BEST MISSIONS

URBAN STRIKE'S KILLER SKIRMISHES

HAWAII

It's not exactly a hard mission, but the level looks great and introduces you to a good variety of objective types, tasking you with taking out tough stealth ships, destroying an enemy bridge and even dropping a bomb to clear out some forest for a rescue mission.



MEXICO

The novelty of getting to pilot a ground vehicle in the GAV makes this mission a memorable one, but it also offer some great combat moments and the simple but satisfying task of dropping a smart bomb on a factory.

NEW YORK

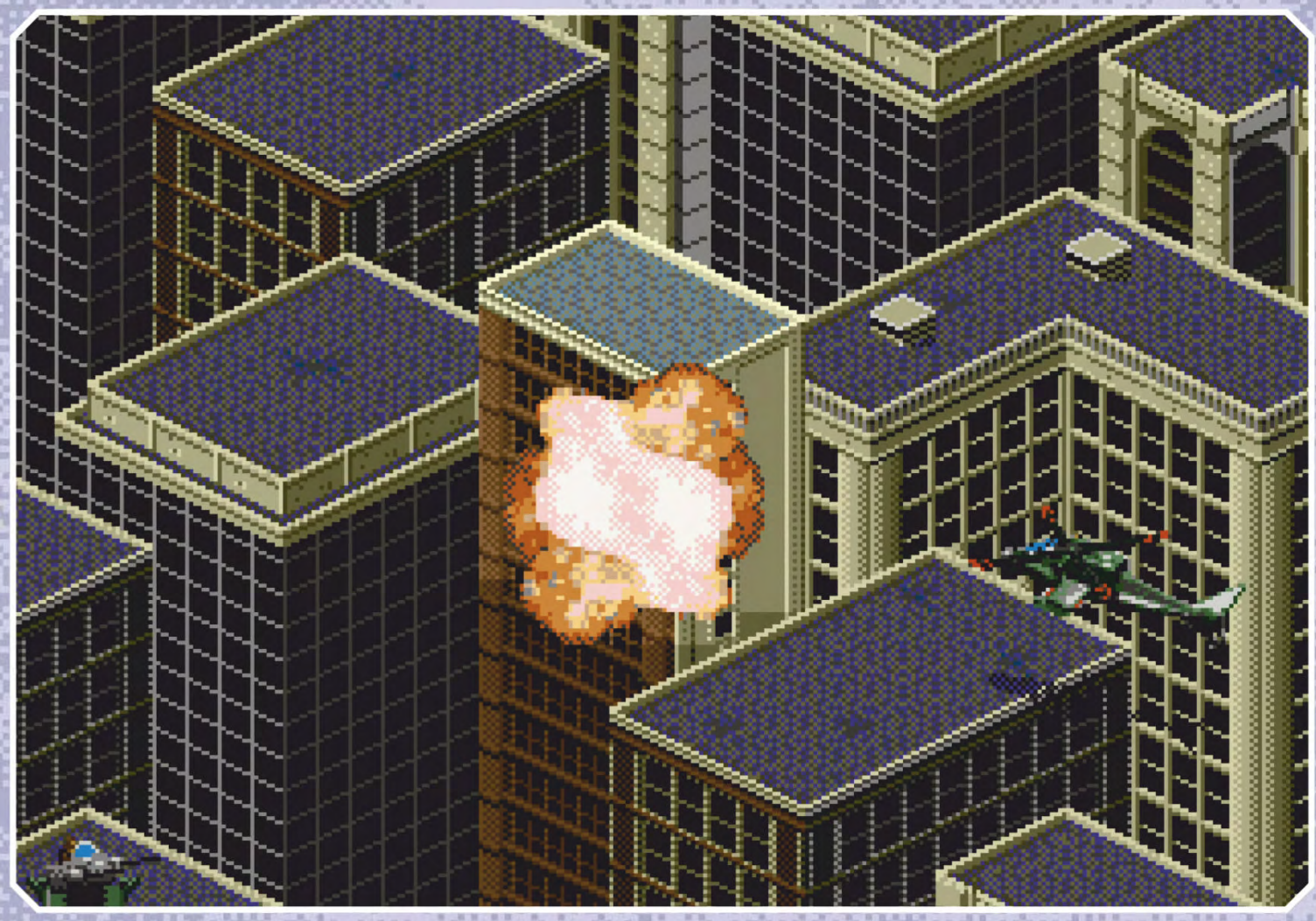
The detailed and cramped representation of New York's skyline makes this one stand out. A mission including damaged World Trade Centres is a bit eerie for modern eyes, but its nevertheless a solid level.

LAS VEGAS

Getting to take to the streets at night and witness the neon lights of Las Vegas is a cool feeling. This stage is packed full of hard-hitting enemy units so this stage will require some careful planning and piloting skill.

BAJA OIL RIGS

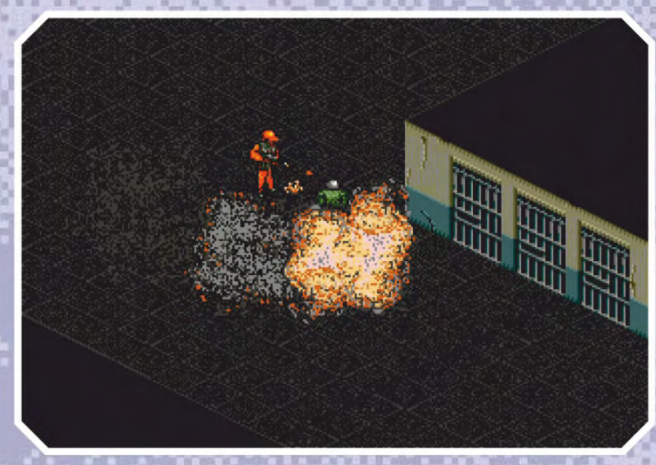
Coming to the aid of a Russian sub, a sinking cruise ship and destroying a fleet of aircraft based on one of the stage's oil rig are a few of the moments that stand out in this mission which ends with an on-foot raid of the main rig.



» [Mega Drive] *Urban Strike* has some satisfying bitmap explosions. Boom!

» [Mega Drive] A brief moment of respite before all the carnage starts up again. Use times like this wisely.

» [Mega Drive] The graphics of *Urban Strike* are a suitable step up from the earlier games, but still feature that distinctive gritty feel.



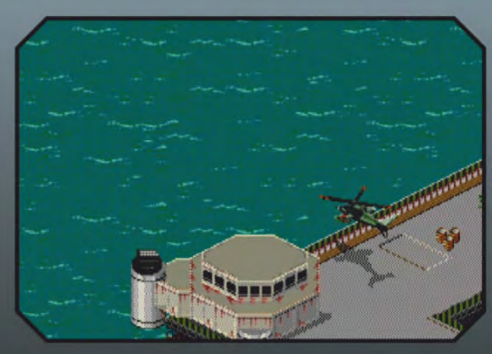
» [Mega Drive] Being able to leave your chopper and infiltrate buildings certainly made *Urban Strike* stand apart from the earlier games.

SURVIVING THE STRIKE

SIX WAYS TO SEE YOUR MISSION OUT

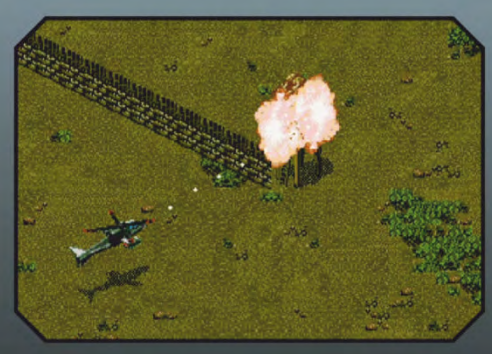
KEEP MOVING

1 Stay still while fighting with enemies in *Urban Strike* and your armour will quickly deplete. You always need to be moving, dashing in and out of danger and taking shot while on the move to avoid taking damage.



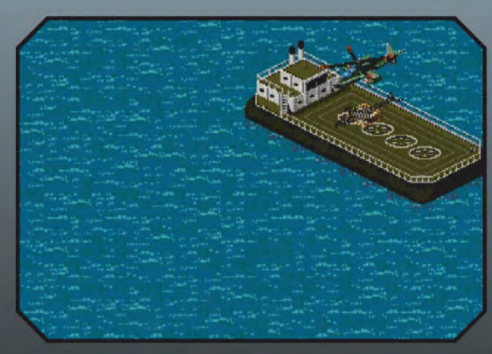
WATCH YOUR FUEL

2 There's nothing more frustrating than completing a tricky mission and then seeing that low fuel warning and realising you're not going to make it back to base in time. Check your fuel before heading on a mission and plan your approach based on where refills are located.



DESTROY EVERYTHING

3 Blowing up buildings, towers and other structures will often refill fuel, ammo or armour. You're going to need these things over the course of a mission so its worth blowing up buildings as you come across them so you know where you can refill resources as and when you need them.



HALF-ARSE IT

4 You do not need to complete all objectives to the letter of the law to complete them, so listen out for the 'mission complete' call. In the opening stage for example, collecting and delivering two of the four mirrors is enough to mark the mission as complete.

"Tougher enemies now need to be approached with speed and swift manoeuvring"

piloting a ground vehicle – the armoured beast that is the experimental GAV unit.

New to *Urban Strike* is the introduction of ground missions where your pilot disembarks from his 'copter and fights on foot using a machine gun and missile launcher. Developer Mike Posehn has since revealed that these sections were introduced under pressure from publisher Electronic Arts and that this was never an idea that he was particularly happy with. There are three ground-based missions in the game – one taking place in an oil rig, one in Alcatraz and one in a Las Vegas casino. They are unquestionably the weakest sections of the game – you character is far less responsive that when you're piloting your 'copter and the enemies you're dealing with far less interesting. You can see why Mike would have preferred to put the resources spent developing these sections into improving the core game. These missions are sparse enough that they provide a little bit of novelty, but it would be hard to argue the game would miss them.

A more fundamental change made to *Urban Strike* is the removal of the ability to strafe your 'copter, completely changing the way you must approach combat. Rather than dodging enemy fire by shifting from side to side, tougher enemies now need to be approached with speed and swift manoeuvring. Hit and run flyby attacks where you unload on an enemy before they have a chance to train their guns on you, before attacking again from another angle, are effective. Whether this change amounts to a net positive ultimately depends on your personal preference. Again, Mike Posehn has indicated this new direction came from the publisher and that he didn't feel the game's engine was suitable for this more fast-paced combat style, but the change at least forced players to take a fresh approach. Given that the this was the third consecutive year when we'd had a *Strike* game, that change of approach was arguably necessary.

More uncontroversially positive is the scope and scale of the game. Over the course of the game's ten missions, we're given relatively large spaces to play in, each offering just enough of a twist on the objectives you're tasked with completing to make the missions feel unique. For the most part, the game looks fantastic – the cloudy San Francisco, essentially a blank space with a few buildings popping out, is a notable blot on the copy book – offering a diverse array of environments for us to visit. The game kicks off with a *Jungle Strike*-reminiscent mission set in Hawaii, moves us to the Baja Oil Rigs and takes a stop in a *Desert Strike*-esque Mexico level before we head to the promised urban landscapes, such as the towering skyscrapers of New York and a night mission in neon Las Vegas. This aesthetic variety combines nicely with good mission design and novelty diversions – the ground missions and the GAV, for example – to give its campaign an epic feel.

Urban Strike would be the last of the 16-bit era *Strike* games and, despite getting less attention than its two predecessors in the modern day, is a worthy addition to the trilogy. While the series would continue into the 32-bit era with *Soviet* and *Nuclear Strike*, it is the 16-bit games which *Urban Strike* bought to a close which, rightly, are remembered most fondly. ✱

CONVERSION CAPERS

SNES

The SNES conversion of *Urban Strike* was released a year after the Mega Drive version. The graphical and audio hit this version takes can be lived with, but the dropped frames and sluggish controls make it far from the smooth experience it should be.

MEGA DRIVE

The original Mega Drive version of *Urban Strike* – the only one handled by the main development team – is unquestionably the superior one. It offers the best showcase of the game's variety of locations and a better aural experience too.

GAME GEAR

One might expect that the Game Gear version of *Urban Strike* suffers from similar issues as the disappointing SNES port. However, while the graphics and sound are necessarily downgraded, and the controls can be a bit fiddly, this version is surprisingly smooth.

GAME BOY

In the Game Boy's cut-down version of the main game's campaign, you visit Hawaii, Baja Oil Rigs, Mexico, Las Vegas and the game's final Underground mission. It lacks finesse but this compact version runs well.

BE PATIENT

5 Some of the objectives you're given to complete can't be done until other missions are finished. If a mission is marked by a load of flashing question marks on the map, you're probably best off doing others until your receive an update.

FREE STINGER

6 Shoot all the buildings on the main oil rig on the Baja Oil Rigs stage and you will find the copilot Stinger. Rescue her for a huge boost to your weapon skills that will serve you well for the rest of the game.

Hardware Heaven

TeraDrive

» **MANUFACTURER:** Sega/IBM » **YEAR:** 1991 » **COST:** ¥148,000+ (launch), ¥40,000+ (today)

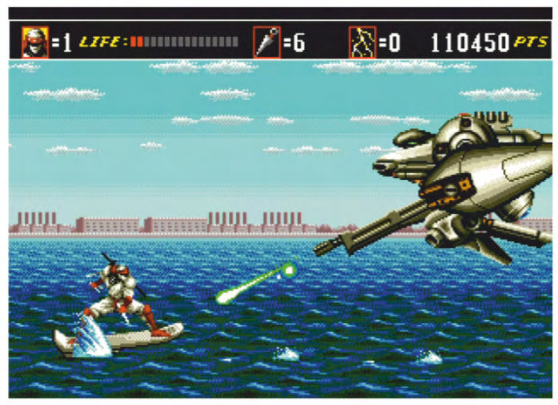
Of all the oddball Mega Drive variants out there, this is one of the most desirable – a full-fledged 286 PC, complete with the ability to play Mega Drive cartridges. The TeraDrive came with all the Mega Drive parts on the main PCB, and specially written PC software like Sega's Puzzle Construction could use those parts. This was rather unique, as most console/computer hybrids, such as the earlier Sharp X1 Twin, would only allow you to use one part of the machine at a time.

Three configurations of the TeraDrive were made available. The cheapest included just 640KB RAM and a floppy disk drive, a mid-priced model bumped the RAM up to 1MB and added a second floppy drive, while the most expensive maxed out the motherboard with 2.5MB RAM and swapped the second floppy disk drive for a 30MB hard disk. Sega and IBM appeared to have some lofty goals for this particular machine, as an expansion connector for the Mega-CD is still present on TeraDrive units and a special drive was planned. Unfortunately, the machine didn't sell in huge numbers – perhaps because neither the Mega Drive nor the PC were ever particularly popular in Japan to begin with.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Shinobi III: Return Of The Ninja Master

The PC is not a machine that has loads of high quality platform games to spare, so being able to dip into the Mega Drive library is a welcome luxury. But with so many to choose from, which one gets the nod? Our choice is this superb ninja action game, which sees Joe Musashi returning to slice and dice the Neo Zeed nasties. It's a faster and flashier game than *The Revenge Of Shinobi*, thanks to Joe's new moves (including the much-needed ability to run) and the ability to ride horses, surfboards and more in certain stages.



TeraDrive fact

■ Despite having the same basic concept of marrying the PC and Mega Drive, the TeraDrive is completely unrelated to the Amstrad Mega PC released in 1993.

PROCESSORS: INTEL 80286 CPU (10 MHZ), MOTOROLA 68000 CPU (7.67 MHZ), Z80 CPU (3.58 MHZ)

RAM: 640KB+ (2.5MB MAXIMUM)

GRAPHICS: 320X224 DISPLAY, UP TO 64 COLOURS ON SCREEN FROM 512 PALETTE (MEGA DRIVE MODE), 320X200 8-BIT COLOUR DISPLAY (PC MODE)

AUDIO: YAMAHA YM2612 SOUND CHIP, SIX FM SYNTHESIS CHANNELS, PLUS TEXAS INSTRUMENTS SN76489 FOUR CHANNEL PSG

MEDIA: ROM CARTRIDGE (UP TO 32 MEGABIT), 3.5-INCH FLOPPY DISK (1.44MB), OPTIONAL HARD DISK

OPERATING SYSTEM: IBM DOS J4.0/V

SYSTEM SUPPLIED BY
GARY PINKETT

SO YOU WANT TO COLLECT...

MEGA DRIVE SHMUPS

Shoot-'em-ups, like Japanese RPGs, typically hold their value on the second-hand market. With prices for Mega Drive blasters on the rise, it feels like an ideal time to investigate some of the more popular examples and kick off a brand-new Retro Gamer regular at the same time

Words by Darran Jones

MASTER OF MAGIC

ELEMENTAL MASTER

EXPECT TO PAY £130+ (USA)

EXPECT TO PAY £60+ (JPN)

DEVELOPER:	TECHNOSOFT
RELEASE:	1990

While it's a little on the easy side, this vertically scrolling blaster from Technosoft is a Mega Drive classic that is certainly worth tracking down and adding to your collection. Refreshingly, it casts you in the role of a powerful wizard who uses unique elemental spells to rain down carnage on his enemies (*Twinkle Tale* does something similar and fetches even higher prices). Released in 1990, *Elemental Master* is notable for an exceptional soundtrack from Toshiharu Yamanishi, a selection of monstrously large bosses and its distinctive fantasy theme. While it won't take long to complete the seven levels (of which the first four can be tackled in any order) it's clever level structure means you'll constantly return to it to beat your score. As with a few other games we're covering within this feature, the Genesis variant of *Elemental Master* sells for far more than its Japanese counterpart. Luckily the lack of text in these games mean you should just plump for the cheaper option.

» [Mega Drive] You'll often be herded into tight spots, so make sure you have the firepower to survive.

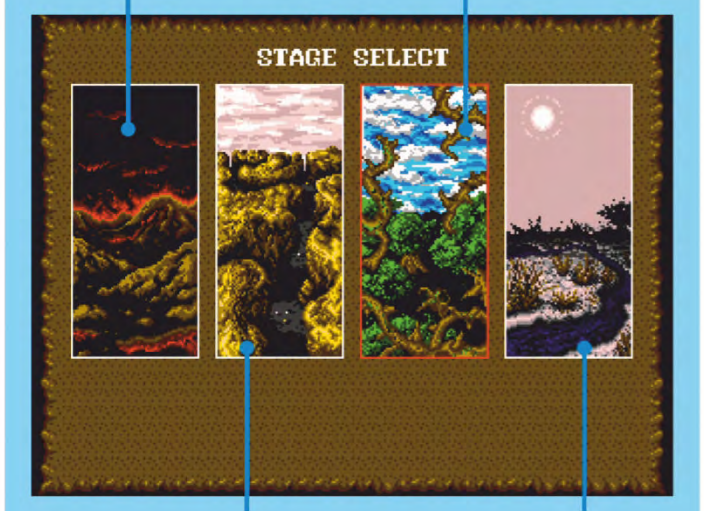
» [Mega Drive] Pick up the mirror power-up and you'll create duplicates of your hero.

LEVEL MASTERY

What to expect from the first four zones

Fire Zone
The Fire Zone is a pretty treacherous place that's filled with lava and flames and is guarded by a massive flaming devil. Defeat him and you're rewarded with powerful fireballs that do short work of enemies.

Earth Zone
Things are heating up and you'll be forced to make full use of your available weapons. The large hedgehog boss is a bit of a pain, but he does grant you a powerful forward firing attack.



Wind Zone
This is a fairly straightforward area to navigate, although there are some annoying bottlenecks. Beat the winged guardian that resides here to unlock a powerful wind attack.

Water Zone
Another tough stage that we don't advise tackling immediately. If you do take the risk you'll meet a fast moving water serpent and be rewarded with a cool ability to shoot jets of water.

EXPECT TO PAY £20+ (UK)

A TRUE TOAPLAN CLASSIC

TRUXTON

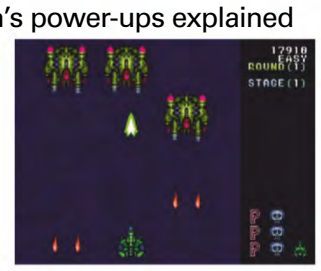
DEVELOPER: TOAPLAN
RELEASE: 1989

■ Known in Japan as *Tatsujin*, this early Mega Drive entry remains one of the most satisfying blasters on the system. It's an extremely accurate port of Toaplan's popular shooter, which does admittedly take something of a graphical hit, but it retains all the thrills and spills of the arcade original. *Truxton* is the very definition of a no-thrills blaster, offering a relatively simple weapon system and requiring you to take down increasingly tougher bosses. It works brilliantly, however, and you should definitely look at acquiring it.

ICONOGRAPHY Truxton's power-ups explained

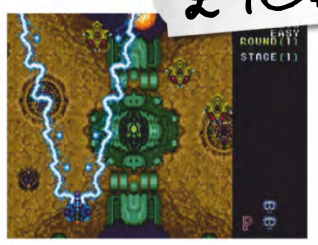
Power Shots

Fly over the red icon power-up and your Super Fighter will start spraying out a fan of bullets which will eventually increase to fire in five directions as more Power Shot pick-ups are obtained.



Truxton Beam

The green icon power-up grants the Super Fighter the ability to spew out concentrated energy beams that can make short work of the game's bigger enemies. Up to five powerful beams can be fired at once.



Thunder Laser

This blue item gives you access to arguably the best weapon in the game. It's an insanely powerful laser that locks onto enemies and doggedly pursues them around the screen. It's very gratifying to use.

LOOKS AREN'T EVERYTHING

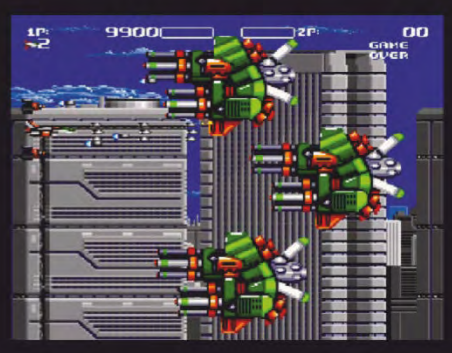
AERO BLASTERS

EXPECT TO PAY £40+ (JPN)

DEVELOPER: KANEKO
RELEASE: 1991

EXPECT TO PAY £30+ (USA)

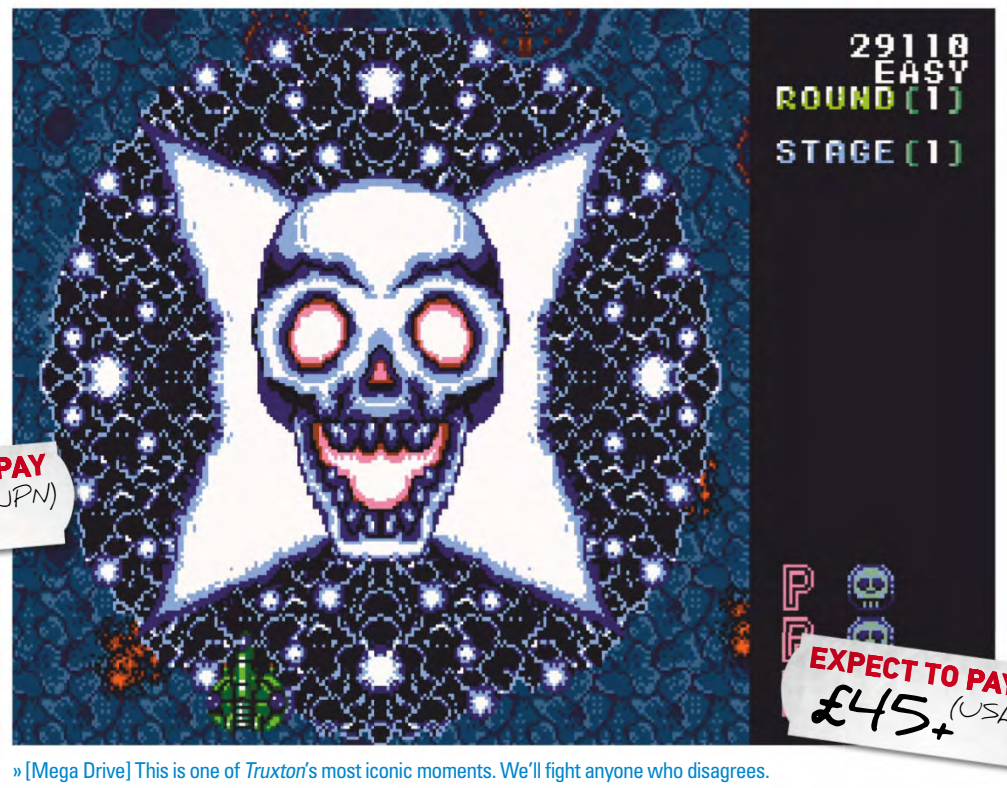
■ This is another great blaster that's slowly starting to rise in price. It's another arcade port and like *Truxton,* it features relatively simple mechanics, but don't let that sway you from purchasing it. The level design throughout is of a very high standard, while the power-up system gives you a surprising amount of weapons to play around with (seven, in fact) which range from a useful reverse shot, to the ability to home in on incoming enemies. *Aero Blasters* won't win any graphical rewards, but if you're looking for satisfying blasting action you won't be disappointed.



» [Mega Drive] This is also known as *Air Buster* in the US, just in case you're after a copy and can't find it.

» [Mega Drive] This level is excellent, requiring you to dash through tiny tunnels at tremendous speeds.

"Truxton is the very definition of a no-thrills blaster"



EXPECT TO PAY £45+ (USA)

» [Mega Drive] This is one of *Truxton*'s most iconic moments. We'll fight anyone who disagrees.

AVERAGE BLASTING AT A HIGH COST

ELIMINATE DOWN

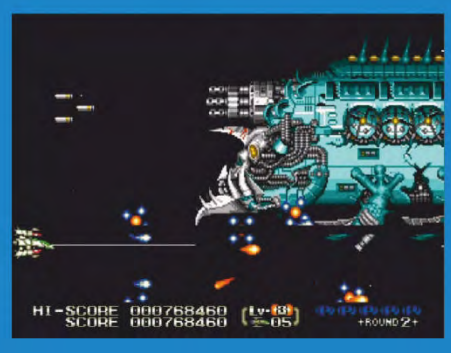
EXPECT TO PAY £850+

DEVELOPER: APRINET
RELEASE: 1993

■ *Eliminate Down* has become infamous as one of the Mega Drive's most outrageously expensive games today. While we don't personally think it's worth the insane amount of cash it consistently goes for, that hasn't stopped it from being coveted by Mega Drive collectors worldwide.

The game itself is a solid, if rather conventional, shooter that shares more than a few similarities with Irem's *R-Type*, which is never a bad thing in our book. Graphically it's very impressive in places, typically throwing loads of sprites onto the screen (with only the minimal amounts of flicker) and featuring some imposing looking bosses that can be incredibly tough to take down.

While its eight levels feature some solid design in places, they do tend to overstay their welcome and *Eliminate Down*'s power-up system lacks the elegance of some of its peers that we've covered here. You'll certainly wring some enjoyment out of Aprinet's space shooter, but it comes at an eye-watering price.



» [Mega Drive] *Eliminate Down* is not the most original of games, as this take on *R-Type*'s mothership proves.

» [Mega Drive] As well as being visually arresting, Aprinet's game sports some radiant explosions.

WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

GYNOUG

DEVELOPER: MASAYA
RELEASE: 1991

■ We recently ran an Ultimate Guide on *Gynoug* in issue 187, but it's worth highlighting again just how great it is. There's an unusual horror theme to *Gynoug*, which makes it one of the most distinctive shooters on Sega's system. It doesn't have particularly complex mechanics to master and its weapon power-ups are laughably simple compared to many of the other shooters we're featuring here, but like *Truxton* and *Aero Blasters*, the action at its core is superb and it offers a tough, but gratifying challenge. Masaya's decision to use relatively small sprites for its hero, Wor (a winged angel), and many popcorn enemies mean that the highly detailed mayors you face manage to look even more imposing and impressive. Best of all *Gynoug* it's one of the cheapest game we're covering here, meaning you've absolutely no excuse to not own it.

BOSS RUSH Do you remember these scary mayors?

Dragoon

This gruesome looking boss looks like a cross between a rock and Jack Skellington. Our advice is to shoot this nightmarish foe down as quickly as possible.

EXPECT TO PAY £15+ (UK)

Orrpus

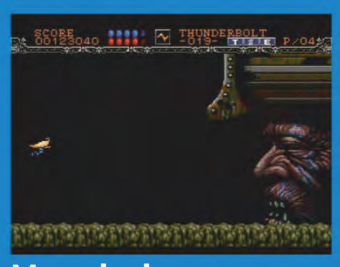
Gynoug's Orrpus appears to be in perpetual pain and looks like its screaming out in terror. Don't feel sorry for it though; just fill the ugly thing full of hot lead.

EXPECT TO PAY £20+ (JPN)

Gark

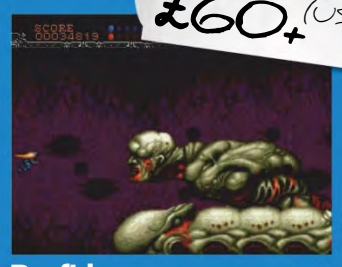
Masaya used all sorts of influences for *Gynoug* and there's definitely some steampunk vibes coming off this metallic monstrosity. Shoot his mouth whenever it opens up and you'll be home free.

EXPECT TO PAY £60+ (USA)



Masseboth

You'll initially be confronted with an ancient ship when you first meet Masseboth. Before long you'll soon discover this gargantuan fellow lurking underneath it.



Perfidy

We're not sure what films the *Gynoug* team watched, but they clearly love body horror. This particular 'member' of *Gynoug*'s roster is enough to give anyone nightmares.

SIMPLE, BUT EFFECTIVE

HELLFIRE

EXPECT TO PAY £25+ (USA)

EXPECT TO PAY £15+ (UK/JPN)

DEVELOPER: TOAPLAN
RELEASE: 1990

■ The fact three Toaplan releases have made our list is a testament to the company's proficiency within the genre. Part of the beauty of *Hellfire* is the simple efficiency of its design, with the entire game focused around the firing capabilities of your CNCS1 fighter. A simple stab of the Mega Drive's B button allows you to cycle between four firing setups: forwards, backwards, diagonally and up and down. The lasers of your craft can then be beefily powered-up by continually grabbing floating icons. While this sounds rather uninspired, *Hellfire*'s strength comes from its carefully structured level design, with each level requiring you to continually switch laser positions in order to have the best chance of survival. It's not the prettiest of shooters, but, like *Aero Blasters*, it impresses where it matters. It's nice and light on the wallet, too.

» [Mega Drive] You only get a few of these powerful beams so use them sparingly.

GREATNESS HAS A PRICE

GLEYLANCER

EXPECT TO PAY £350+

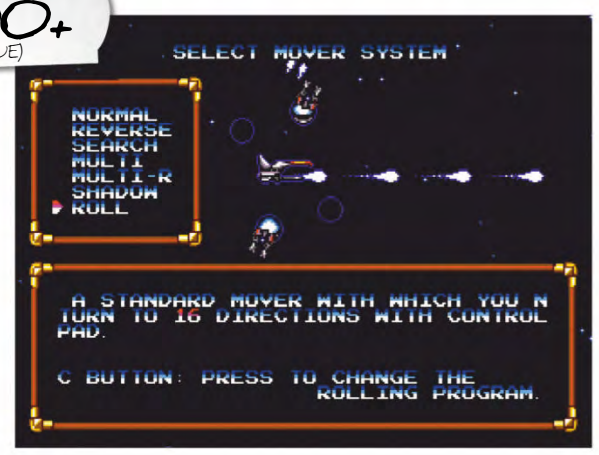
DEVELOPER: NCS CORPORATION
RELEASE: 1992

■ Many consider *Gleylancer* to be one of the Mega Drive's greatest shooters and it's hard to argue otherwise. It looks beautiful with some sensational looking sprites and meticulously detailed environments. The soundtrack is also of a high standard with pounding beats and lots of synth-infused tunes that perfectly complement the action. Best of all is *Gleylancer*'s weapon system, which allows you to choose a specific set of pods called 'gunners' at the start of the game which can then be set up in one of seven different configurations to tackle the many enemies you'll encounter.

While we baulk at *Gleylancer*'s high cost, there's no denying its sheer quality. If your wallet can't stretch to cover the asking price (we'd advise selling some games to fund it) you might want to consider the recent reissue (although that too is climbing rapidly in price).

EXPECT TO PAY £100+ (REISSUE)

» [Mega Drive] *Gleylancer* has some extremely stylish visuals and there's normally plenty of action on-screen.



» [Mega Drive] You can't switch your weapon loadout on the fly so make sure you pick the one best-suited to your playing style.

TWO GAMES IN ONE

SLAP FIGHT MD

DEVELOPER: TENGEN
RELEASE: 1993

■ This late conversion certainly took its time arriving on the Mega Drive, but it was well worth the wait. Coded by Mikito Ichikawa, it's an extremely accurate port of the 1986 arcade game. That alone isn't why it's worthy of inclusion here, however. No, the real reason we're featuring this notoriously expensive Mega Drive release is because it features an exclusive mode, which is essentially a brand-new game in its own right. Sporting music by the legendary composer Yuzo Koshiro and bolstered by massively improved graphics, *Slap Fight MD* is great fun, with new levels and the addition of the Typhoon Bomber attack that allows you to drop a gigantic bomb at the expense of reducing your ship's attack power. *Slap Fight MD*'s limited run has led to it fetching higher prices than it probably deserves in the eyes of many, which means you'll need to think long and hard about whether you should add it to your collection.

» [Mega Drive] *Slap Fight*'s visuals have been suitably enhanced for the *MD* version of the game.

» [Mega Drive] The Typhoon Bomber is unique to Slap Fight MD and looks very pretty in action.

ROBO OH YES!

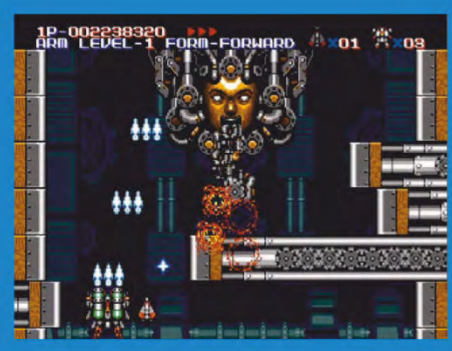
MUSHA ALESTE

EXPECT TO PAY £125+ (JPN)

DEVELOPER: COMPILE
RELEASE: 1990

■ Compile's fantastic mech shooter continues to rise in price and we fully expect it to soar past *Gleylancer* levels of ridiculousness as the years roll on. Graphically impressive on release, it remains a thing of beauty today with stylish craft designs that are brimming with detail and silly levels of parallax to soak up. Compile's *Aleste* series constantly evolved with each release and while this probably doesn't top *Super Aleste* on the SNES, it's a very close call indeed. Like *Gleylancer*, *MUSHA* has an exceptionally crafted weapon system that takes a while to master but certainly rewards those that persevere. In addition to continually upgrading your main gun with power chips and giving it six different weapon configurations, you can also pick-up and switch between three additional weapons, which can also be powered up. It's not the most accessible shmup, but mastering it brings its own rewards. Buy it.

» [Mega Drive] *MUSHA* has some fantastic anime cut scenes to savour before the game begins.



» [Mega Drive] If you're wondering, 'MUSHA' stands for Metallic Uniframe Super Hybrid Armour

FEEL THE FORCE OF TECHNOSOFT'S POWER

THUNDER FORCE III

DEVELOPER: TECHNOSOFT
RELEASE: 1990

■ There's a reason why *Thunder Force III* is included on the Mega Drive Mini – it's the best *Thunder Force* game. All joking aside, though: Technosoft's third game really is our favourite entry in the series thanks to its sensational soundtrack, creative level design and a selection of truly terrifying bosses to face off against. The variety to this 16-bit classic really is quite something and while it's not the easiest of shooters to one-credit, the ability to tackle the first five stages in any order gives you plenty of time to master your multispeed fighter's abilities and its expansive weapon system.

Interestingly, *Thunder Force III* is the only game in the series to actually get ported to the arcades (where it's known as *Thunder Force AC*). That version, along with *Thunder Force III* eventually found their way to the Saturn as part of Technosoft's *Gold* series. The SNES also received a version of *AC* in the form of *Thunder Spirits*, but it's a pretty weak effort, meaning you should stick with the Mega Drive original. Get it while it's still relatively cheap.

» [Mega Drive] This difficult stage requires you to navigate constantly moving rock formations.

> **"Technosoft's third game really is our favourite entry in the series"**

ULTIMATE GUIDE: SUPER STAR WARS

Luke, Han and Chewie all feature in this bombastic 16-bit romp that pushed the graphics and audio of the Super NES to their absolute limits

WORDS BY LEWIS PACKWOOD

***Super Star Wars* was – and still is – absolutely gorgeous. The wonderfully animated, bountifully colourful sprites absolutely pop from the screen.** It's stunning. Even now, some 27 years after its release, it can hold its own in a beauty parade of pixel art, with Luke Skywalker's bouncily animated hair scooping the Pantene special award for volume and lustre.

In 1992, games based on film licences were hardly bastions of quality. Games like *RoboCop* and *Batman* from Ocean stood out from a generally god-awful crowd of cheap cash-ins on the latest movie's popularity. But *Super Star Wars* was something else entirely. For a start, it was hardly an opportune tie-in with a current film release, seeing as the movie it was based on came out some 15 years previously. Rather, it was clearly a work of love, made by proper fans – fans who wanted to give life to things like womp rats that were only ever mentioned in passing on the big screen.

Peter Ward was the game's programmer, and elsewhere on these pages he owns up to being a massive *Star Wars* fan, saying this game is one of his fondest memories. And he worked bona fide miracles squeezing this amount of graphical goodness onto a puny eight-megabit cartridge. In particular, the Mode 7 powered levels – the pseudo-3D Landspeeder romp across Tatooine and the Death Star surface level and Trench Run – were absolutely mind-blowing back in 1992. These kinds of 3D free-roaming affairs were practically unheard of back then, and all in all,

» [SNES] You have to wonder why Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen chose to raise Luke in such a dangerous environment.

"Super Star Wars was something else entirely"

Super Star Wars acts almost as a demonstration reel of the Super NES's capabilities.

And some of the sprites it threw around were absolutely huge. Aside from the massive bosses, there was the memorable trip inside the Death Star, which saw you ducking TIE fighters as they screamed out of the hangar, literally filling the screen as they hurtled by. And the game not only let you take control of Luke Skywalker, you also got to play as Han Solo and everyone's furry favourite Chewbacca as the game unfolded. Chewie naturally had access to his enormously powerful bowcaster, while Han could roll and dodge like the sneaky, scurrilous smuggler that he is. But then again, once Luke got his lightsaber a few levels in, he became the natural choice. LIGHTSABERS! They may be the elegant weapons of a Jedi Master, but more importantly, they're the wish-fulfilment power fantasy of a generation of teenagers. ▶

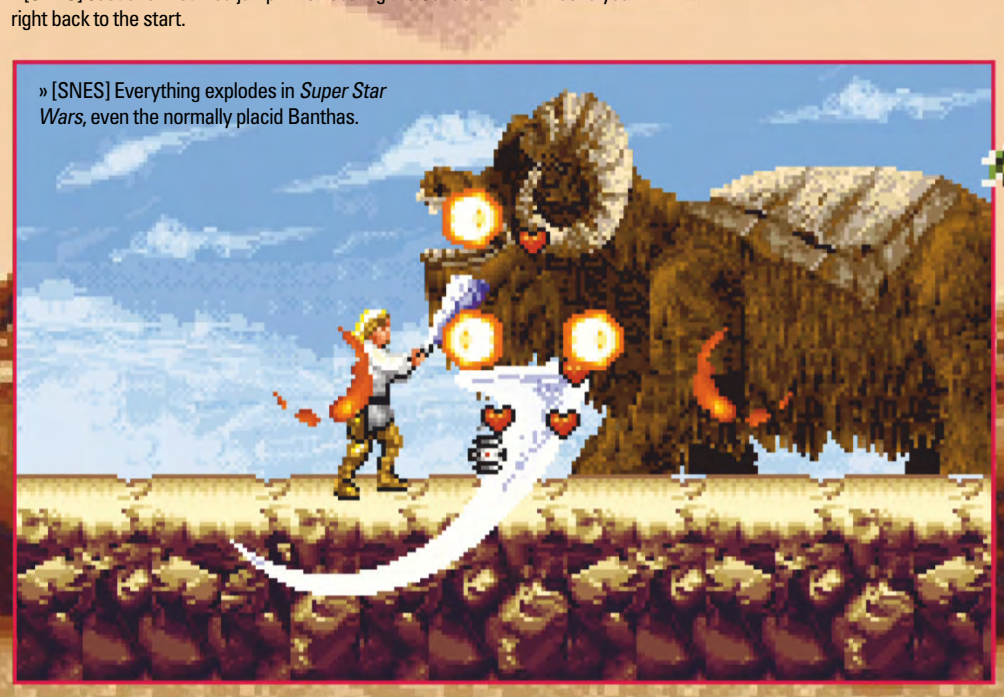
CHOOSE YOUR HERO

LUKE SKYWALKER

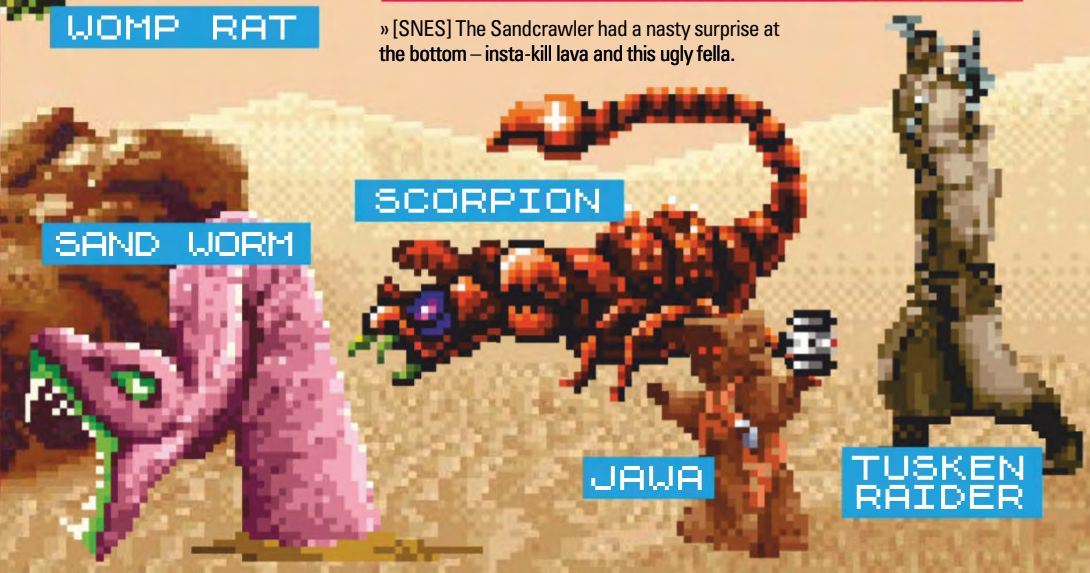
It's funny to think that there aren't actually that many *Star Wars* games that let you play as this lovable blonde farmhand made good. Luke starts off with a blaster, but later he gets to play with a lightsaber, allowing him to cleave through Banthas like nobody's business.

» [SNES] Just one mistimed jump when scaling the Sandcrawler will send you right back to the start.

» [SNES] The Sandcrawler had a nasty surprise at the bottom – insta-kill lava and this ugly fella.



» [SNES] Everything explodes in *Super Star Wars*, even the normally placid Banthas.



FEEL THE FORCE

SUPER STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

■ Released in 1993, a year after *Super Star Wars*, this sequel closely follows the run-and-gun gameplay of the original, but with a few tweaks. Luke, Han and Chewie are all still playable, but the option to choose your character has been removed. Still, everyone now gets a handy double jump, and Luke has Force powers, too, along with the ability to deflect laser blasts with his lightsaber. Each character can also switch between primary and secondary weapons. Although the game was released in 1993 in the United States, us poor muggins in Europe had to wait until 1994 to play it.

SUPER STAR WARS: RETURN OF THE JEDI

■ The final game in the trilogy was released in 1994 in the US, and didn't make it to European shores until 1995, right at the end of the Super NES's lifetime. Again, the gameplay is very similar to the first game, but *Return Of The Jedi* also gave us the chance to play as Princess Leia and the lovable/annoying Ewok Wicket. Leia is arguably the most interesting character in that she gets to use various weapons, including a staff, a blaster and the good old choke chain from her brief period as a slave in Jabba's Palace.

Swooshing around a lightsaber is all well and good, but actually getting to the point in *Super Star Wars* where you can do that is no small matter. Let's make no bones about it: *Super Star Wars* is *hard*. This game, despite otherwise glowing reviews, was criticised for its extreme difficulty at the time of release, and going back to it now is a shock to the system, mollycoddled as we are with infinite continues and generous restart points. Remember the Sandcrawler level? Yep, that lava will kill you instantly. Oh, and don't forget the leaps of faith, never quite knowing whether you'd land on solid ground or in a limb-melting pool of lava. And that's without even mentioning the trials it takes to get into the Sandcrawler itself, with its tiny moving platforms and multitudinous gun emplacements.

But what sweet rewards if you were able to surmount the Jawa threat! Mos Eisley treated us to the fabled cantina, its erstwhile band burbling out the classic cantina theme as Luke cuts a swathe through its patrons. And indeed, now is a good time to reflect on the stunning achievements of Paul Webb, the genius behind the chip tunes and death-throe warbles spurting from your stereo speakers. The fact that he could compress a decent rendition of the classic *Star Wars* theme into a tiny SNES cartridge is a miracle in itself, not to mention the various other classic *Star Wars* scores that pepper the game, from *The Imperial March* to the aforementioned cantina boogie.

» [SNES] The Jawas fly up into the air screeching 'Utinni!' when you bag them.

But above all else, it's the sound effects of *Super Star Wars* that leave a lasting impression. Tiny scorpions in the Dune Sea attack with mini nuclear explosions, while despatching a seemingly fragile womp rat is accompanied by a sound like a container falling off a freight lorry. *Super Star Wars* deserves maximum volume from your TV speakers at all times to do justice to the utterly bombastic sound effects, from the *vwmooff* of a powered-up blaster to the *vrrrrrerrrrrrm* of a TIE fighter. Still, perhaps it's the Jawa's screeching cry that lasts longest in the memory, the hapless 'utinni!' as they're blasted off-screen, a sound that's directly sampled from the film. ▶

"It's the sound effects of Super Star Wars that leave a lasting impression"

» [SNES] The rare extra life pick-ups appear in the form of Luke's face.

» [SNES] The cantina patrons are less than friendly to old Chewie. Tip: let the Wookiee win.

CHOOSE YOUR HERO

HAN SOLO

The kind-hearted smuggler becomes playable around halfway through the game, just after Luke fights his way through the scum and villainy of the cantina. He plays almost identically to Luke, although he gets a rather nifty roll move instead of Luke's slide, and he doesn't get to wield a lightsaber, natch.

» [SNES] Old extend-o-neck here is mightily annoyed that Chewie spilled his pint.

Q&A

PETER WARD

The coder behind the SNES game talks Jawa shrieks and unintended difficulty

How did you get involved with *Super Star Wars*?
We had to win the contract by proving we were capable of doing it! For this, we completed two levels as a demo, the 'trench' level and the 3D landspeeder scene. LucasArts was apparently impressed enough from this to award us the contract.

What problems did you face in squeezing the game onto a cartridge?
The first *Star Wars* was an eight-megabit cartridge only. Fitting everything was indeed a huge challenge. All sprite sets first went through a lossy reduction phase, in which similar characters were eliminated. We then compressed all assets using an LZ type compression, which allowed for extremely fast decompression. Pretty much every byte on the cart was used!

How did you go about creating the bombastic sound and music?
Paul Webb created all the music and sound effects, and did a remarkable job. It was all MIDI based. So he started by assembling a collection of digital instruments, and went from there. LucasArts provided us with the original score on paper. I also helped with some sound effects. I had all the movies on LaserDisc at the time, and would ask Paul to 'rip' a few sounds from the movie. Things like the Jawa's 'utinni' yell when hit were sampled this way, among others.

Did you encounter any problems with the *Star Wars* IP holders regarding the original characters?
No. Mostly because artists at LucasArts did most of the artwork for us.

***SSW* is noted for its difficulty, was it always your intention to make a hard game?**
Not at all. I think what happens often is that our testing staff become so good at the game that we are constantly making adjustments to keep it challenging for them. But for average players, this ends up being too hard. What we should have done was have focus group testing with average players, and then adjust difficulty based on their gameplay. Regrettably, we did not do this, and released a game that was too difficult to play.

What's your favourite part about the game?
There are many. From climbing the Sandcrawler, to seeing the cool (and huge) Banthas. For me, I think I like how the trench battle turned out (perhaps this won us the contract). Yes, we could have done more with it, but for a 16-bit system, I think it came off looking pretty close to the movie, and what people remembered from it.

Do you have any standout memories of working on *Super Star Wars*?
I am a big *Star Wars* fan, so it was a lot of fun to work on. I really cared about everything I put into it, and tried my hardest to deliver the very best I could do. Given the development time, and size of content required, I think I am happy with what was finally delivered. As the programmer, it was always very exciting to receive new assets (be it new worlds or new animated characters) and bring them to life in the game. Doing the iconic *Star Wars* intro was fun, and I tried to get it as close as possible. Overall, the entire project remains one of my most fondest memories in game development.

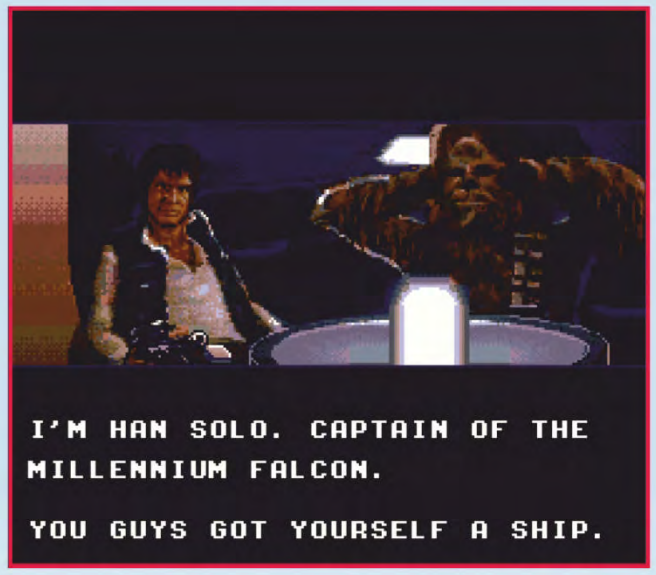
CONVERSION CAPERS

WII VIRTUAL CONSOLE

■ *Super Star Wars* got a long-awaited second outing on the Wii Virtual Console in 2009. The conversion gave players the much-needed option to create save points, making the game's extreme difficulty somewhat more bearable. It didn't make it onto the Wii U's Virtual Console list, however, and with the closure of the Wii online services earlier this year, this version is now lost.

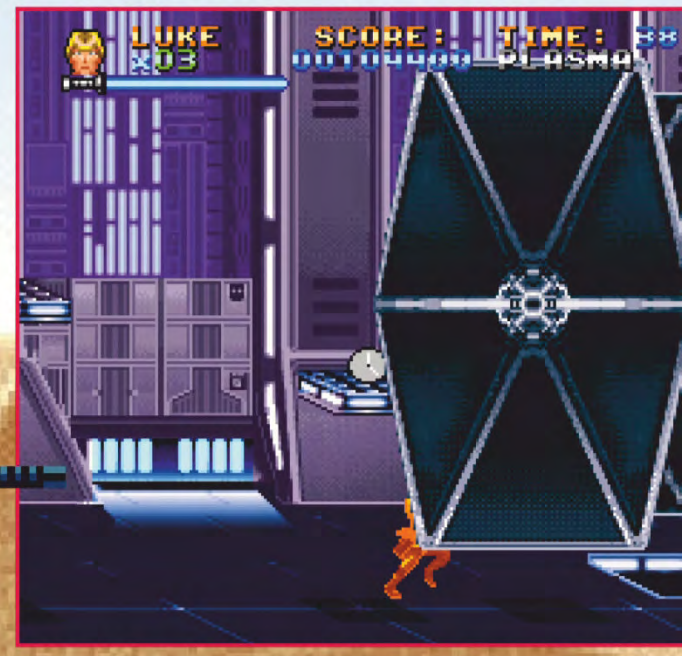
PS4 AND VITA

■ Code Mystics converted *Super Star Wars* to the PS4 and Vita in 2015, including a much-needed save game function within the game itself. The conversion runs with a chunky, *Star Wars*-themed border, but otherwise it looks identical to the original. The two SNES sequels didn't get the same treatment, though, and there's currently no way to play them legally unless you have the Super Nintendo originals.



» [SNES] There are some lovely pixel art interpretations of scenes from the film in-between missions, just look at Han Solo and Chewbacca here.

» [SNES] The trip to Docking Bay 94 is fraught with perils, from Stormtroopers to nasty grabby hooks.



» [SNES] The TIE fighters in the Death Star hangar are huge, and whizz by at fantastic speed.

BOSS RUSH

SARLACC PIT MONSTER

■ The sarlacc beast is a bit more animated here than in *Return Of The Jedi*. *And* it's got tentacles, an early precursor to the digi-tentacles that were added in the *Special Edition* version of the film.

■ Look out for it poking a cheeky tentacle through the sand, then leap away to the opposite side of the screen and blast away. That's pretty much it.

LAVA BEAST JAWENKO

■ Who knew the Jawas kept a pit of lava at the bottom of their Sandcrawler? Not only that, it's home to this prickly fellow.

■ As long as you can avoid falling into the lava, this monstrosity is pretty easy to beat. Just stand on the middle platform and keep blasting away at his glowing weak spot, and jump every time it opens its mouth.

MUTANT WOMP RAT

■ Damn, this guy got big. Was this the womp rat you could bullseye from your T-16, Luke? If so, it doesn't count.

■ The lightsaber is your key to victory here. Initiate constant spinning superjump attacks to dodge out the way of its claw attack, while fending off the annoying mini womprats and damaging the big guy at the same time.

KALHAR BOSS MONSTER

■ You might not remember this guy from the film. Luckily, *Star Wars* fans [like me - Ed] know he appears as a holographic playing piece in the game of dejarik Chewbacca and C-3PO play.

■ His long giraffe neck is his weak point – keep leaping and blasting at his neck strings from the far left of the screen. If he gets close, switch to the lightsaber and spin jump towards him to push him back.

MAINTENANCE DROID

■ Remember the Imperial Probe Droid from *The Empire Strikes Back*? This little git is apparently its annoying little brother, who zips about the place like a mynock stuffed with a firecracker.

■ It starts off by dive-bombing you, so roll as Han to avoid its attacks. Once you've shot both its arms off, it switches between drill attacks and triple laser blasts – keep rolling and blast away when it attacks, which is the only time it's vulnerable.

Speaking of the film, although *Super Star Wars* sticks fairly closely to the plot of *A New Hope*, it's not afraid to borrow elements from the whole of the original trilogy. The first stage sees Luke being dive-bombed by mynocks, little critters who have otherwise only been seen in *The Empire Strikes Back*, when the Millennium Falcon makes a brief and ill-advised pit stop in the maw of a giant space worm. And the first level also features the Sarlacc Pit Monster from *Return Of The Jedi*, imagined here in a rather more nimble form.

Elsewhere there are entirely new monsters and droids that only appear in *Super Star Wars*. The long-necked Kalhar who lurks in the rear of Mos Eisley's cantina is apparently a Mantellian Savrip gladiator, although this game marks his only appearance in *Star Wars* lore. Other original additions include the Stormtroopers' Hover Combat Carrier and the imposing Imperial Defense Droid that guards the end of the Death Star level, although the latter clearly owes a debt of inspiration to ED-209 from *RoboCop*.

Sculptured Software in Salt Lake City, Utah, went on to develop two more Star Wars games for the SNES based on *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return Of The Jedi*, both of which closely followed the template set down by Super Star Wars. The studio itself was bought by Acclaim not long after the release of the third game in the trilogy, being renamed Iguana West and then Acclaim Studios Salt Lake City before being shuttered along with the rest of Acclaim in the early Noughties. Peter Ward went on to work on the *Disney Infinity* games at Disney Interactive Studios, before that too closed in 2016. He continues to work in the Salt Lake City area.

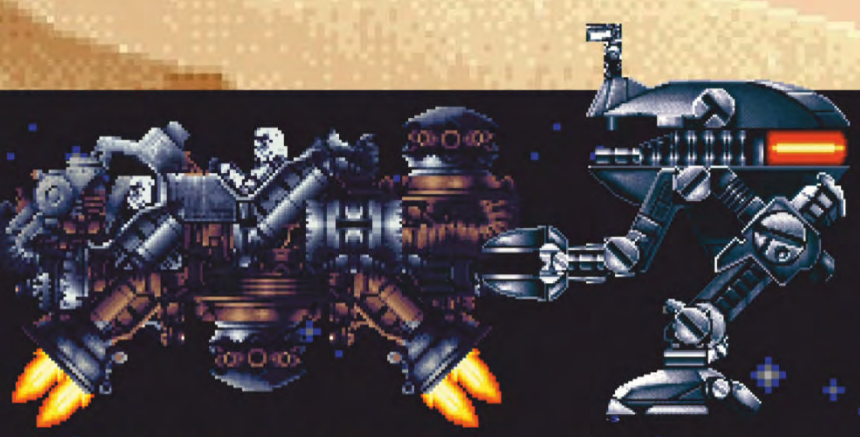
In many ways, *Super Star Wars* wilts under the harsh gaze of hindsight – things like leaps of faith, erratic jumping, unforgiving restart points, instant kills and sections where it's almost impossible to avoid taking damage would be unforgivable sins in a modern platformer. Yet it also manages to absolutely nail the look, feel and, perhaps most importantly, the sounds of its source material. In short, it's one of the best interpretations of *Star Wars* ever seen on the small screen, from the iconic opening text crawl to the *thwooomph* of Luke's lightsaber. ✱

» [SNES] The Imperial Defense Droid attacks by farting out missiles. No joke.

CHOOSE YOUR HERO

CHEWBACCA

■ Chewie joins the fray at the same time as Han, and he brings his bowcaster to the fight. The weapon starts off one level higher than Han or Luke's blaster, giving the Wookie an advantage from the off. However, unlike Luke and Han, he doesn't do a flip during his super jump. He is over 200 years old, after all.



HOVER COMBAT CARRIER

■ These two Stormtroopers are loving their new flying car with its handy gun turrets and jet blasts, which are ideal for frying rebel scum. Shame about the knackered bodywork, though.

■ Keep rolling to stay under the middle of the boss and take out the gun turret underneath first. Then take down the thrusters, the turret at the back and the windscreen(?) near the front. After that, these poor chaps will be defenceless.

IMPERIAL DEFENSE DROID

■ The chunky looking droid bears more than a passing resemblance to ED-209 from *RoboCop*. But rather than relying on machine guns, old IDD prefers mashing up rebels with its extend-o-claws.

■ Slide underneath its legs when it jumps and stay in the right hand corner, where you'll be safe from its chaotic leaping. Then blast at the red weak spot that's exposed when it opens its rump to shoot missiles. Simple.

DETENTION GUARD BOSS

■ Remember that bit in *Star Wars* where Luke faces off against a giant floating droid with a red laser eye on his way to rescue Princess Leia? No? Must be one of the deleted scenes, then.

■ This imposing enemy isn't too hard to deal with if you know the trick. Stand about two thirds across the screen to the right and keep still while blasting at the incoming missiles and the red weak spot when it's revealed. Once it sheds its outer layer, it's almost beaten.

TRACTOR BEAM

■ The Tractor Beam is a darn sight more fighty in *Super Star Wars* than it ever was in the 1977 movie. You'll find it spitting out balls of flame as it slides up and down, the cheeky so and so.

■ To beat it, simply leap up to the top left platform and stand on the edge while aiming shots at the core. You should be able to shoot down any flame balls it sends your way as it rises up.

TRENCH BATTLE

■ Here's old Darth, turning up right at the end in his tricked-out TIE fighter for a bit of father-son bonding/fighting. Sadly he just disappears after you beat him, rather than spinning off into space for a long think about his parenting decisions. He's pretty easy to take down, too – just aim the cursor anywhere on his ship and hammer the fire button, only breaking off to take down the bullets he fires at you.

Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem

INSANE IN THE MEMBRANE

» GAMECUBE » 2002 » SILICON KNIGHTS

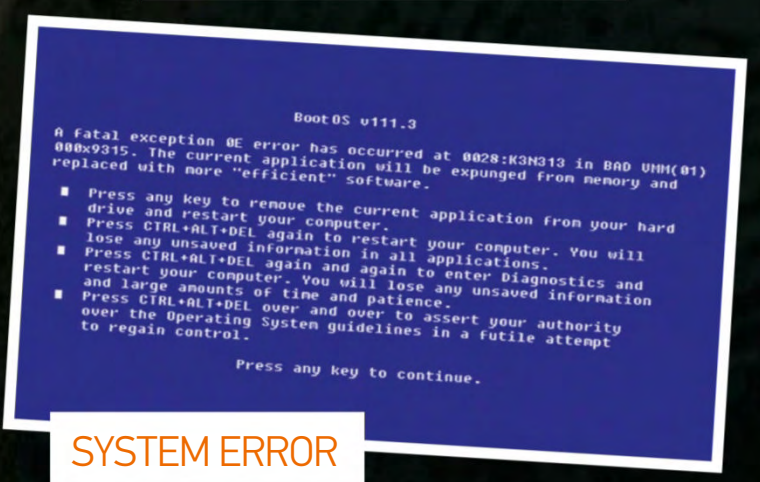
I've always enjoyed playing through survival horror games, even though many of them terrify me. I quit the original *Silent Hill* because it all became too much for me and I never completed *Forbidden Siren* for the very same reason. *Outlast* had my heart racing so much that I thought it was going to give up, and playing *Resident Evil 7* on PSVR in the office caused me to scream. That's right… scream. And yet, I still keep returning to them, because ultimately, I think a lot of us really do enjoy a good scare, which brings me in an admittedly roundabout way to Silicon Knights' ridiculously ambitious GameCube game.

Everything about *Eternal Darkness* intrigued me on release. I loved that you played as a female protagonist, I appreciated that it was inspired by the Cthulhu mythos of HP Lovecraft and I really enjoyed the way it introduced new characters, only to brutally kill them off by the chapter's end. In the end, however, *Eternal Darkness* worked for me because of its excellent 'sanity effects'.

They start off subtly, like annoying you with a fly that crawls lazily across your TV screen, or the volume on your TV being turned down, but as your on-screen avatar begins to lose their mind, everything ramps up. Blood starts dripping from the walls and ceilings, you'll be told that your controller has been disconnected and you have to watch on, dumbstruck, as your avatar gets brutally dismembered right in front of you by a gang of zombies, and the game even emulates a system error. By far the nastiest, though, is the devious trick where the game appears to delete your hard-earned save file. I remember rushing to my GameCube when it first happened, then swearing (and congratulating) Silicon Knights when I realised what had actually happened. I wonder how many of you reading this experienced the same thing?

DELETING YOUR SAVE

INSECTS ON THE SCREEN


BootOS v111.3
A fatal exception 0E error has occurred at 0028:K3N313 in BAD VMM(01)
000x9315. The current application will be expunged from memory and
replaced with more "efficient" software.
Press any key to remove the current application from your hard
drive and restart your computer.
Press CTRL+ALT+DEL again to restart your computer. You will
lose any unsaved information in all applications.
Press CTRL+ALT+DEL again and again to enter Diagnostics and
restart your computer. You will lose any unsaved information
and large amounts of time and patience.
Press CTRL+ALT+DEL over and over to assert your authority
over the Operating System guidelines in a futile attempt
to regain control.
Press any key to continue.

SYSTEM ERROR

THE MAKING OF: SAMURAI SHODOWN

IN THE KNOW

- **» PUBLISHER:** SNK
- **» DEVELOPER:** SNK
- **» RELEASED:** 1993
- **» PLATFORM:** NEO-GEO
- **» GENRE:** FIGHTING

» We'd be as happy as Yasushi Adachi if we'd created a masterpiece like *Samurai Shodown*.

When SNK took on the fighting genre, the company brought swords to a fist fight – and reaped all the rewards you'd expect from such an approach. Yasushi Adachi tells us how his team crafted one of the sharpest fighters of the era

Words by Nick Thorpe

» [Neo-Geo] Bloody scenes like these were censored in the home release of *Samurai Shodown*.

In a duel between samurai, victory is often sudden and emphatic. In the blink of an eye, a flash of steel accompanies a swift swing of the sword, and it's all over. The winner moves on to the next fight – the loser, more often than not, moves on to the next plane of existence. In the early Nineties, fighting games were booming but they were predominantly based on bare-knuckle brawling. SNK changed that with *Samurai Shodown*, a game that brought the drama and danger of swordfights to the arcade. As well as being a success in its own right, the game began one of gaming's greatest 2D fighting series and furthered SNK's claim to mastery of the fighting genre.

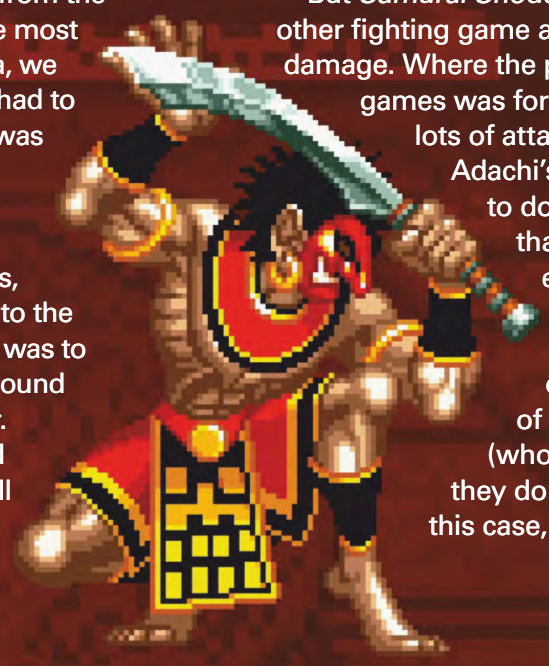
The funny thing about *Samurai Shodown* was that initially it wasn't meant to be a one-on-one fighting game at all. Instead it was to be a scrolling beat-'em-up, more in the manner of a game like *Sengoku* – and rather than featuring samurai characters, the main heroes were monsters. Why was the original concept so radically changed? According to Yasushi Adachi, director of *Samurai Shodown*, it had a lot to do with *Street Fighter II*: "After experiencing the dynamism of the fighting game that was dominating the arcade and console game scene at that time, we asked ourselves what kind of game design we could do, and decided to challenge that masterpiece!"

With the concept of creating a fighting game now set in stone, the team looked to find ways of differentiating its game from the crowd. "In order to challenge the most popular fighting game of this era, we knew there were two things we had to do," explains Adachi. "The first was to introduce the notions of living and dying. Characters wouldn't be beaten by fists, but would lose their life via blades/weapons, giving more impact and tension to the player's experience. The second was to have a deep and detailed background and storyline for every character. Therefore, players won't see and play characters as 'icons', but will see them as living, breathing people. Through this connection players will feel more motivated to protect their characters during battle, and have a strong and memorable gameplay experience with the life and death concept and the unique combatants in the game."

Having made the decision to move away from monster characters, Adachi decided on a historical setting for the game. This affected everything, right down to the title of the game. "I love samurai and ninja, which are representative of the Japanese culture, and decided to choose the word 'samurai' in order to accentuate the notion of life and death so present in this specific Japanese culture." The other half of the title – at least in Japan – was drawn from a shoot-'em-up, of all things. "The Japanese title *Samurai Spirits* was originally inspired by *Dragon Spirit*, and we aimed to merge the words samurai and spirit (soul, etc) alongside Japanese culture."

Samurai Shodown's game design built on SNK's growing experience in the fighting game market. The company had seen success with *Fatal Fury* and *Art Of Fighting*, and *Samurai Shodown* drew a number of elements from the latter in particular. The game also followed the trend towards more graphic violence in fighting games, with plenty of bloodshed and depictions of death – albeit nothing quite so outrageous as in *Mortal Kombat*. The game also included plenty of its own mechanical advances, including the concept of disarming the opponent in weapon clashes.

But *Samurai Shodown* differed from every other fighting game available in its treatment of damage. Where the prevailing trend in fighting games was for players to string together lots of attacks into a painful combo, Adachi's vision was for single hits to do major damage. "I know that even now this kind of extremely high damage that can change the outcome of the battle in one single hit is subject of complaints from players (who are usually laughing when they do this)," says Adachi. "In this case, I will apologise and



CUTTING EDGE

Samurai Shodown was a real innovator in the fighting genre, introducing many features that would become commonplace – and one that wouldn't

RAGE GAUGE

As you take damage, this bar at the bottom of the screen fills and your character begins to turn red, eventually leading to a state of increased damage. This was the precursor to modern super combo gauges.

RUNNING

SNK's *Art Of Fighting* had introduced a forward dash, and *Samurai Shodown* developed this with a sustained running animation. Running was later adopted by *Mortal Kombat*, among others.

WEAPON LOSS

Street Fighter II allowed players to disarm Vega, but *Samurai Shodown* went further. Players could recover their weapons after losing them, and even voluntarily throw them away with some moves.

SATELLITE CHARACTERS

Nakoruru and Galford both have animal companions that follow them and can be directed to attack the opponent. Similar fighters in later games include Chang and Choi in *Capcom Vs SNK 2* and Carl Clover in *BlazBlue*.

HIKYAKU

This courier runs across the battlefield delivering items, including coins, damaging bombs and health-restoring food. Sadly, power-up items haven't really gained traction in one-on-one fighting games.

WHAT MAKES A HERO

Nakoruru is one of Samurai Shodown's most iconic characters, and she's also distinct amongst fighting game heroes. Here's what makes her tick

■ Wherever Nakoruru goes, she's followed by Mamahaha. This hawk can get involved in battle by carrying Nakoruru above the ground to set up attacks, or diving head-first into the opponent at Nakoruru's command.

■ Unlike most women in Nineties fighting games, Nakoruru is meant to be cute rather than sexy – she's quite young and very shy. In character though, she rather wishes that people would stop judging her by those traits.

■ The sword Nakoruru reluctantly wields is named Chichi-ushi ('Father Bull'), and was inherited from her father. The weapon is a makiri, a short ceremonial sword rather closer to a large dagger in appearance.

■ Nakoruru is a teenager who takes no pleasure in bloodshed, and fights due to a sense of duty. Her primary goals are the defence of her home village, Kamui Kotan, and more broadly the protection of the natural world.

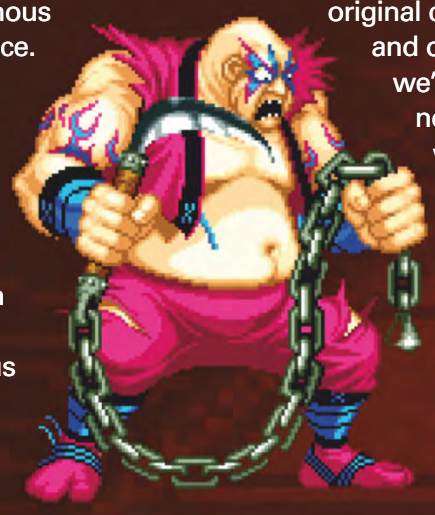
■ Nakoruru is not ethnically Japanese, but rather Ainu – an indigenous people of Japan with their own distinct culture, living primarily on the island of Hokkaido. The style and patterns of her clothing reflect her heritage.

laugh at the same time!" Of course, while this approach had its detractors, it did successfully convey the feeling of danger that Adachi had wanted. He was also acutely aware that even great games can make players salty – in a 2017 interview with *Polygon*, Tomoki Fukui explained that while researching *Samurai Shodown*, a frustrating *Street Fighter II* loss caused the director to fume in silence for a minute. This inspired the Rage gauge, which gave a boost to players that had taken a beating.

In order to achieve the deeper level of identification between the player and their character that Adachi desired, a number of characters were notably based on legendary historical figures – something made possible by the historical setting of the game. "This was also because I always loved samurai and ninja from Japanese culture and history," says Adachi. There are some fairly obvious examples, such as Jubei Yagyu and Hanzo Hattori, but even those characters that don't bear famous names carry some historical influence. "Haohmaru was called 'Musashi' and Ukyo 'Kojiro' during the development of the game," Adachi explains. "Despite us changing their names in the middle of the development phase, most of the team members kept on calling them Musashi and Kojiro!" These names were intended to indicate their status as rivals – Japanese history buffs will likely know that the names reference the renowned samurai Musashi Miyamoto and his rival Kojiro Sasaki, who fought a fatal duel in 1612.

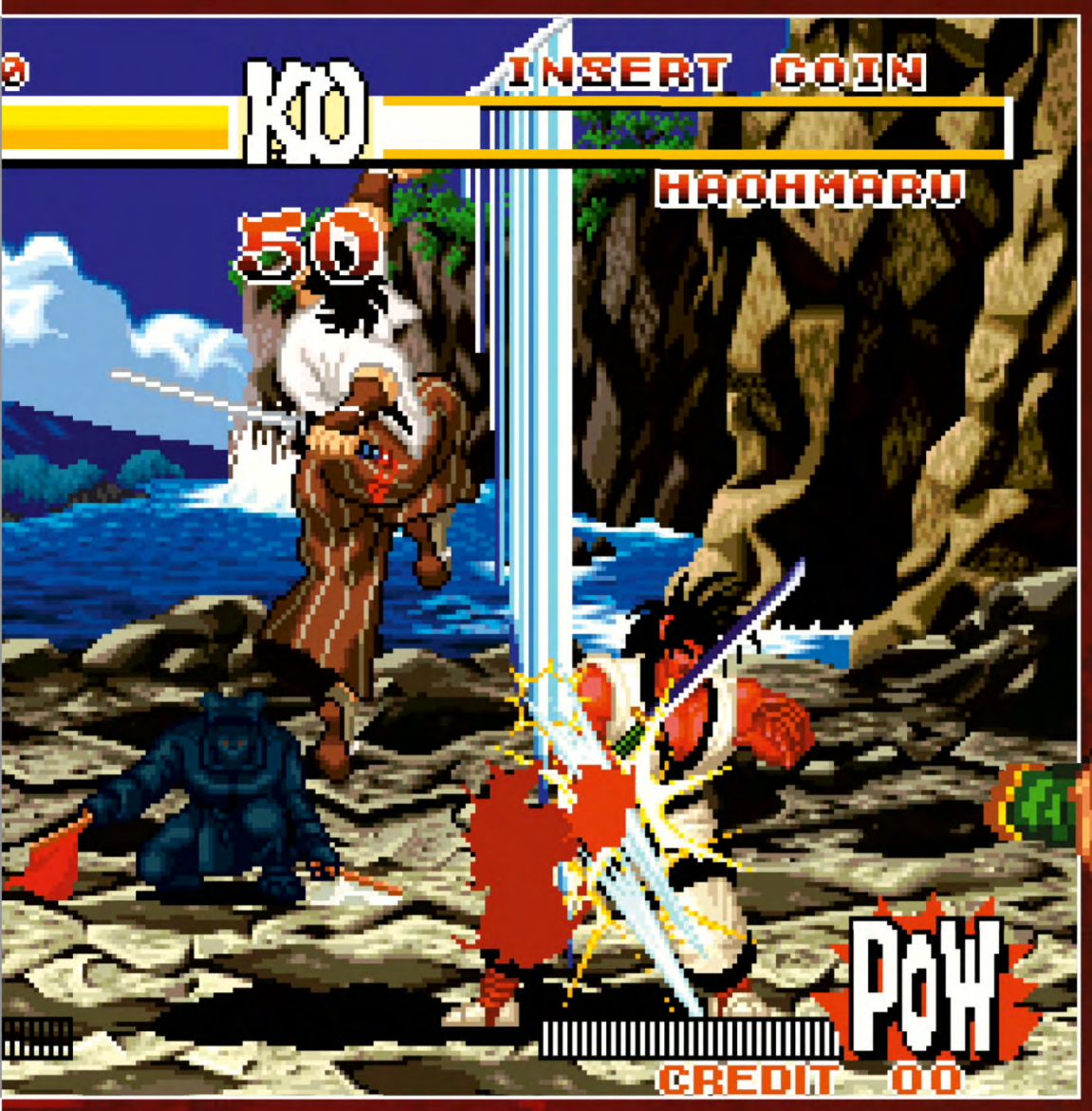
> "Monsters were supposed to be the main characters in the original concept of Samurai Shodown, and only Gen-An survived in the end"
>
> Yasushi Adachi

Two characters that you wouldn't necessarily connect are Ukyo, a beautiful fighter who has women chasing him wherever he goes, and the monstrous Gen-An – both of whom Adachi wanted to include because he "always loved 'dark heroes'." For Gen-An, the darkness is obvious but the reason for a non-human combatant is somewhat less so, until it's explained. "Monsters were supposed to be the main characters in the original concept of *Samurai Shodown*, and only Gen-An survived in the end," we're reminded, though Adachi notes "I think that Kubikiri Basara who appeared for the first time in *Samurai Showdown III* is Gen-An's spiritual successor." For Ukyo, the darkness is less obvious, but is drawn from the fact that he suffers from terminal tuberculosis – an unusual trait for a fighting game character. "I think because of the deep themes of life and the 'live or die' aspect always represented in the game, the concept and presence of a character that had to fight while suffering from a disease at the same time was something that felt almost natural."

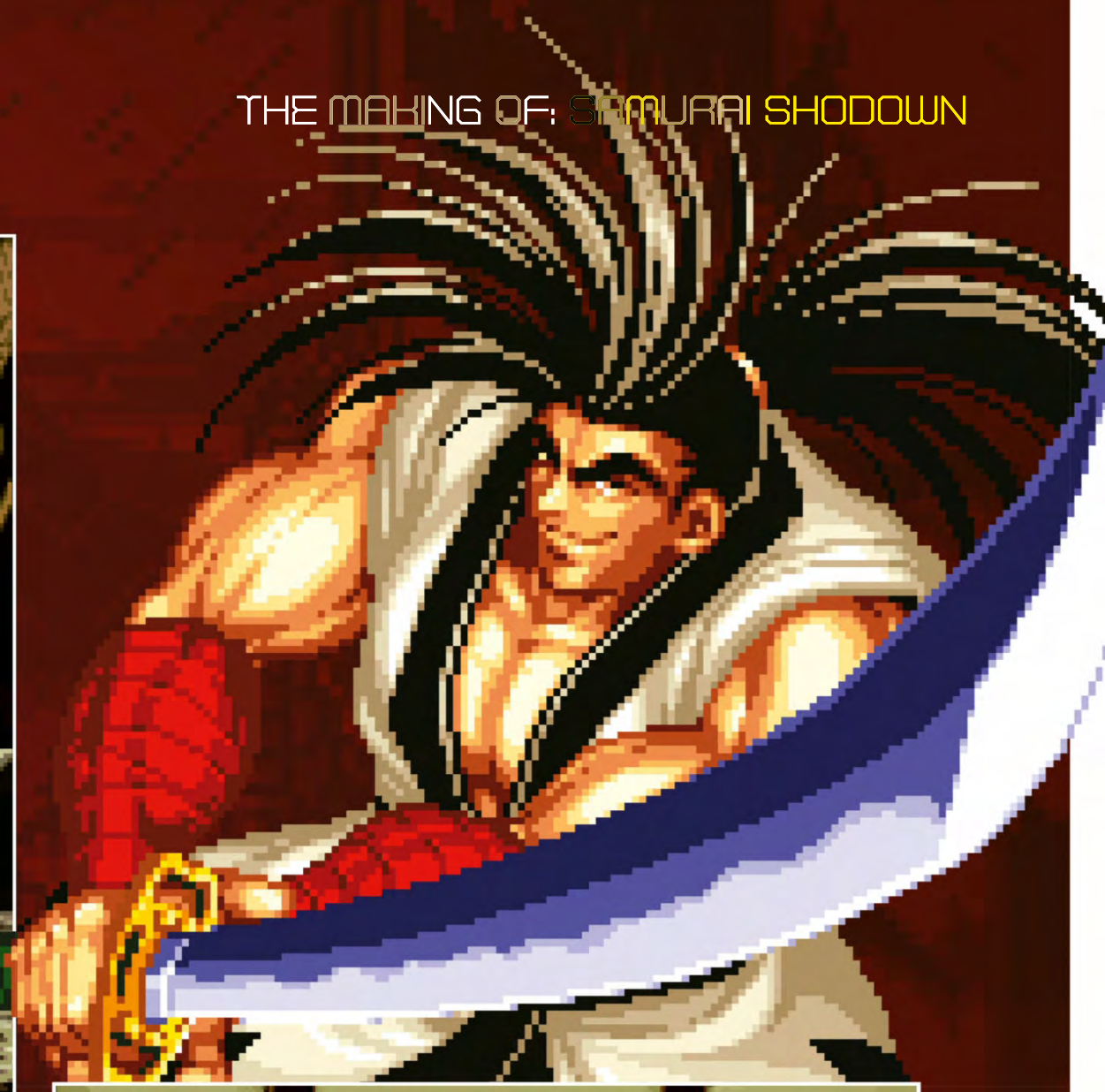


Gen-An wasn't the game's only outlandish and striking character – Earthquake, the colossal Texan bandit, had a fart attack and took up an enormous portion of the screen. So much, in fact, that he was something of a bad idea. "After some thought, it was a bit too much. We shouldn't have created such a character for various development and game balance reasons," Adachi admits. "However, at that time, the team was so serious about Earthquake's addition to the game, no matter if it would create issues afterwards. I remember being asked by designers who were showing Earthquake on-screen if he was big enough, and I replied to them, 'Not enough! Bigger, bigger!' Therefore, they reworked the character size, and asked me later (while grumbling) if he was finally big enough for me, and I said, 'Let's go with it!'"

While you might expect that such a character would pose problems with memory and sprite



» [Neo-Geo] Jubei's attack has maxed out Haohmaru's rage gauge, giving him the chance to make a comeback.



» [Neo-Geo] The game's bonus stage sees fighters slicing through straw training dolls.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

FATAL FURY
SYSTEM: NEO-GEO
YEAR: 1991

ART OF FIGHTING (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: NEO-GEO
YEAR: 1992

THE KING OF FIGHTERS 95
SYSTEM: NEO-GEO
YEAR: 1995

drawing, this was apparently only a problem with Earthquake in certain circumstances. "The biggest hardships we had in development were definitely on the game balance side. However, this was extremely well done thanks to the awesome work from Mr Fukui, the planner in charge of that task at the time, and who still works with me today," Adachi explains. "The other issue with Earthquake was that the other characters couldn't use their throw attacks on him because of his huge size and this animation was taking up too much memory in the game. It was tough, but we were able to create a workaround to solve this problem in the end by creating a special throw animation just for him."

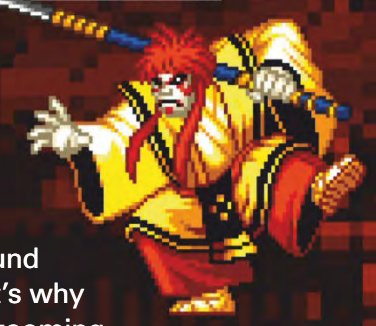
Despite the decidedly Japanese feel of the game, quite a few of the 12 fighters were foreigners – we've already mentioned Earthquake, but we also have French fencer Charlotte and the Californian ninja Galford. "This was to lighten the heavy atmosphere of blade wielding combatants, and give a more festive feeling to the game. We didn't want to make it feel *too* serious," Adachi reveals. "It was also a dream of mine to create a blue-eyed ninja," he adds, referring to Galford. In fact, when you take into account his husky, Poppy, we start to get the feeling that Galford was something of a wish fulfilment character all around – when we asked why animals were included Adachi replies, "This is simply because I love animals." Surely there's more to the story than that? "When I was a kid I yearned to travel on a journey with pets, ▶

» [Neo-Geo] It's perfectly possible for characters to be sliced in twain, like poor Ukyo here.

» [Neo-Geo] The straight, angular motion trails left by Charlotte's weapon serve well to highlight her precision.

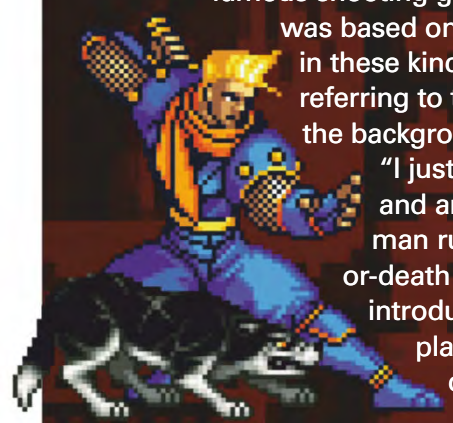
» [Neo-Geo] The camera zooms out to give fighters space to move – you'll see that often when Galford fights.

» [Neo-Geo] Charlotte's choice of fencing as a fighting style reflects her French origins.



▶ and I possibly attempted to fulfil that dream by including animals in *Samurai Shodown*," Adachi elaborates.

That makes sense, but then the story takes a weird turn as we learn about the inspiration for Poppy and Mamahaha's in-game functions – as it transpires, the way they follow their fighters comes from Adachi's fondness for a different genre entirely. "Another reason why I added animals in *Samurai Shodown* was to balance the game, which included numerous elements from shooting games," the director highlights. "For example, the idea and origins of Mamahaha and Poppy for example were both slightly based on the 'option' feature you can find in certain famous shooting games. Same for Hikyaku, who was based on the items floating around in these kind of games," he explains, referring to the courier who runs through the background throwing items into battle. "I just thought it would be funny and amusing to include this old man running into the world of life-or-death battles. This feature was also introduced in order to help weaker players having a tough time during the midst of gameplay."

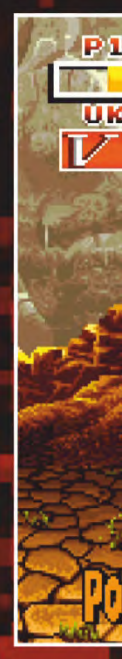


In terms of its presentation, *Samurai Shodown* was a game of contrasts. "One of the main goals with the brand-new game that was *Samurai Shodown*, was to introduce the contrasting aspects of stillness and motion, and 'wabi-sabi', two specific concepts of the traditional culture in Japan," Adachi tells us. "The game's soundtrack was created with the purpose to emphasize these ideas, and also to give distinct personality to each of the characters." The soundtrack incorporated traditional Japanese instruments and compositions, and in some cases takes on a minimalist tone unexpected of a fighting game – in some stages, such as Jubei and Hanzo's, the track is dominated by ambient background noise. Other characters, particularly the non-Japanese characters such as Earthquake and Galford, have more traditional stage themes that incorporate modern sounds.

By comparison, the visual presentation was brash and full of life. Characters and backgrounds were colourful and well animated, and the look of the game was greatly enhanced by a camera that zoomed in and out depending on the relative positions of the fighters. "This feature was added to the game to emphasize the aspects of mobility," says Adachi. "Despite it being called *Samurai Shodown*, we wanted to add a lot of ninja characters to the game. These characters would need a lot of space to move around freely, at will on the screen. That's why we decided to have the camera zooming in and out."

Despite the fact that SNK was in the early stages of its rise to prominence as a fighting game developer, *Samurai Shodown* was far from a protected project – in fact, it was a game that seemed to concern the upper management. "The company didn't have a lot of expectations for this game, but I knew it would be a hit. I remember being asked by a board member at the time what I would do if the game would be a flop and didn't sell at all," says Adachi. "I replied that I would take full responsibility and quit SNK. Of course, I knew *Samurai Shodown* would be a hit, and had no intention to leave the company!"

Fortunately for Adachi, he was on the money regarding the game's fortunes, as *Samurai Shodown* quickly achieved success after its arcade release in July 1993. The Neo-Geo AES version was one of the first games for the system that didn't come home strictly arcade perfect –



THE MEN BEHIND THE MYTHS

MUSASHI MIYAMOTO

■ Few samurai ever claimed as many victories in battle as Miyamoto, who lived from 1584 to 1645. It's believed that he won over 60 duels, without losing a single one. He authored *The Book Of Five Rings*, an influential martial arts text detailing his innovative twin sword technique. During development, Haohmaru was named after him.

KOJIRO SASAKI

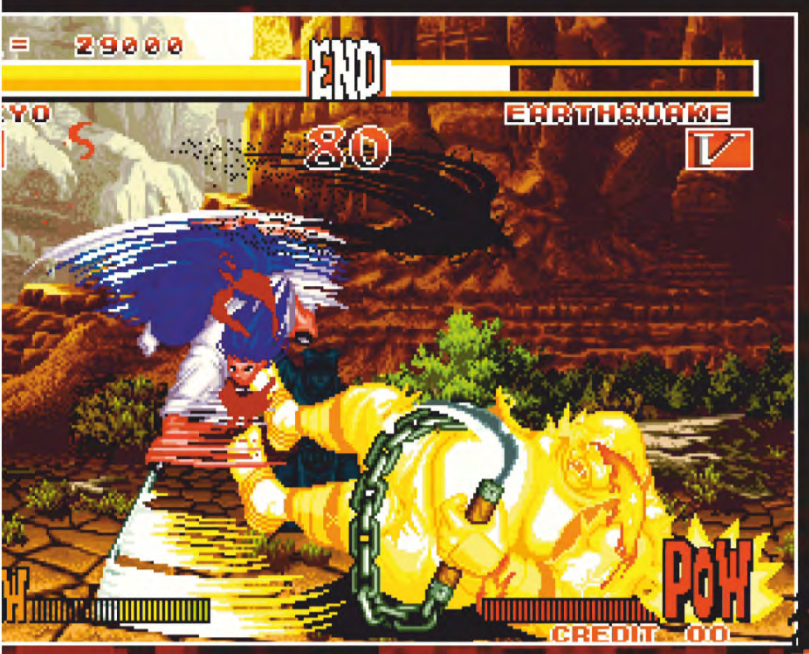
■ Regarded as the most difficult opponent ever faced by Musashi Miyamoto, Sasaki was born in 1585 and was killed by Miyamoto in 1612. He was known to handle an unusually long nodachi with terrifying speed and precision. Ukyo was named after him during development, to highlight his rivalry with Haohmaru.

HANZO HATTORI

■ Living from around 1542 to 1596, Hattori is distinguished primarily by his astonishing feats in military service including hostage rescues and castle assaults. His accomplishments were a key factor in the rise of the Tokugawa Shogunate. He's most often depicted as a ninja in popular culture, and that tradition continues in *Samurai Shodown*.

» [Neo-Geo] Having your attacks guarded will often leave you open to major punishment.

» [Neo-Geo] Wan-Fu can voluntarily disarm himself in order to launch a devastating blazing blade attack.



» [Neo-Geo] The character artist perfectly captured the swiftness of Ukyo's movements in this sprite.

"SNK has always taken care of the Samurai Shodown brand, and I sincerely and deeply thank them for this"

Yasushi Adachi

due to the ongoing controversy over violence in videogames, SNK decided to censor blood on non-Japanese consoles. It didn't matter which version of the game you played as the data was identical worldwide, so importers were out of luck unless they wanted to pick up a Japanese console. It all seemed a little silly – as one poster on the alt.games.sf2 newsgroup reasonably asked, "How many nine-year-olds own a $500 Neo-Geo?" Despite this minor controversy, the Neo-Geo AES version of the game was very popular with the system's small audience, and is one of the more widely available and affordable games for the system today.

Reviews of the Neo-Geo home cartridge version were very positive. In an 8/10 review, *Edge* described it as "arguably the best one-on-one beat-'em-up on any home system", commenting that the blood-soaked action was "disturbingly satisfying". All four reviewers in *Electronic Gaming Monthly* awarded the game 9/10, with Ed Semrad calling the game "a graphic masterpiece that cannot be rivalled". Criticism was directed at character balance in *GamePro*'s review, with Earthquake and Nakoruru being singled out as "too cheap" and "too weak" respectively, but the reviewer felt that the game "is in many ways clearly superior to the original *Street Fighter II*". Though noting that it "has its work cut out for it against *Super Street Fighter II*," *Samurai Shodown* earned perfect scores in all categories and was described as "one of the two best fighting games of all-time."

A variety of home releases followed for all manner of other platforms – as well as conversions for the mainstream Mega Drive and SNES, the game made handheld appearances on the Game Gear and Game Boy, with the latter proving to be particularly enjoyable. But *Samurai Shodown* was also at the forefront of a new generation of consoles, and the Neo-Geo CD, FM Towns and 3DO delivered the most faithful contemporary conversions. SNK was sure to capitalise on the success of its unique fighting game, with the first of many sequels arriving in 1994. A number of spin-off projects were also produced, from an animated TV adaptation to games like *Samurai Spirits RPG* and the Nakoruru visual novel, and *Samurai Shodown* characters have appeared in crossover games including *The King Of Fighters* series, *SNK Heroines* and the *Capcom Vs SNK* games.

Although he now heads up the studio Engines and no longer works on *Samurai Shodown*, Adachi remains fond of the series. "SNK has successfully survived throughout many hardships over the years, and constant changes in the videogame industry," he enthuses. "The company has always taken care of the *Samurai Shodown* brand, and I sincerely and deeply thank them for this." Indeed, it's easy to see that the company places a great deal of importance on *Samurai Shodown* – it was the series chosen to launch the Hyper Neo-Geo 64 system, and the series that brought an end to Neo-Geo cartridge releases. SNK recently revived the series with a game simply titled *Samurai Shodown*, which has been well received due to its uniqueness and focus on fundamental fighting game strategy – qualities that it possesses largely because it has stuck to the principles of the original game, with high damage and minimal combos. That's a testament to the work of Adachi and the rest of the team at SNK. Gaming has changed considerably since 1993, but *Samurai Shodown*'s distinctive style of fighting remains a cut above the competition. ✱

Some of Samurai Shodown's characters were based on real people – but who were they?

JUBEI YAGYU

Yagyu is a mysterious figure, as the details of his life are not particularly well recorded. He was born around 1607 and died in 1650, and during his life he was employed by the Shogun as a sword instructor and later a government inspector. The in-game character incorporates the unverified legend that he wore an eyepatch.

AMAKUSA SHIRO

Born to Roman Catholic parents around 1621, Shiro was a devout believer and amassed a loyal following of Japanese Christians. He led them in the Shimabara Rebellion against the Shogunate in late 1637, but was captured and beheaded in early 1638. The final boss of *Samurai Shodown* is based on him, albeit incredibly loosely.

Virtua Stick fact

■ Japanese Virtua Sticks have microswitched joysticks, and can be distinguished from their export counterparts by their colour scheme – western units are all black.

Virtua Stick

» **PLATFORM:** Saturn » **RELEASED:** 1994
» **COST:** £39.99 (launch), £15+ (now, unboxed), £30+ (now, boxed)

With Sega hoping to leverage its impressive arcade muscle to help the Saturn to victory, it was inevitable that the system was going to have an arcade stick – and naming it after the game most people would be picking it up for wasn't a bad move, either.

The Virtua Stick features the full control layout of a Saturn pad so it will work with any Saturn game. However, as you would expect it is best used for the Saturn's many arcade conversions, like *Virtua Fighter,* as well as some classic 2D fighting and shooting games.

One unusual feature of the Virtua Stick is the position of the L and R buttons. Rather than adopting a standard two-by-four-button layout, Sega chose a standard two-by-three layout and added L to the left of the lower row and R to the right of the upper row, each with non-standard button designs. While odd, these offset rows work well for four-button control schemes as seen in Neo-Geo conversions. Like Sega's previous sticks for the Mega Drive, the Virtua Stick has an autofire feature that can be toggled on or off for each button, as well as a slider to vary the rate of fire. ✱

ESSENTIAL GAME ATHLETE KINGS

As great as the standard Saturn pad is, there are some tasks that just require a chunkier method of control, and getting world record scores in *Athlete Kings* is just such a task. Put the Virtua Stick on a table and hammer the heck out of those big ol' buttons, because Jef Jansens isn't going to win the 100 metre sprint by himself! One tip, though – if you're going to use the autofire feature, don't do it in a multiplayer game unless you want to become the victim of a nasty javelin accident, courtesy of your aggrieved opponent.

Minority Report

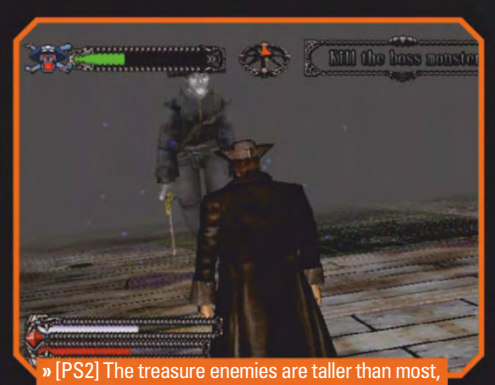
INTERESTING GAMES YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED

SIMPLE 2000 SERIES

Sony's PlayStation 2 had a popular range of budget games released in Japan that covered all sorts of different genres. Here we look at some of the most interesting to appear in the long-running series

Words by Jonny Dimaline

» [PS2] That tall green (or sometimes blue or red) guy in the back is the most important enemy – he knows where the treasure is!



» [PS2] The treasure enemies are taller than most, and bosses are taller still. Clearly, long legs are important if you want to climb the ranks.

THE PIRATE

■ DEVELOPER: **DIGITALWARE** ■ YEAR: **2006**

■ **On first sight, it would be easy to dismiss *The Pirate* as yet another *Dynasty Warriors* clone, among many others in the *Simple 2000* series, with only its nautical theme to distinguish it.** It wouldn't be entirely unfair, either, since the game does focus heavily on the kind of crowd-based melee combat that Koei pioneered in that series. It's in the theme, though, and how steadfastly *The Pirate* sticks to it that really makes it shine.

You start out moving a little boat around a sea chart, looking for other boats or locations on land to raid, and most of those raids take on the same format: the ship (or island, or whatever) is full of undead pirates (which do come in both zombie and skeleton flavours). Find the biggest ones and kill them to reveal the location of a treasure chest. Do that a few times and eventually the boss (always just a significantly stronger version of the regular enemies) will make his presence felt. Kill him and your mission is accomplished and you go back to sailing around looking for the next fight. There's a few other variants, like a bonus stage that's just a mad dash to find bags of gold, or a stage where you face off against an unending parade of enemies until you manage to reach a certain threshold of chained hits, but basically, it's all that familiar kind of large-scale brawling.

It's also a very economically developed game. This should be obvious, with it being a budget title and all, but DigitalWave really left all the stops in on this one: every ship stage uses the exact same map, every stage uses one of two sets of enemies (and each set is essentially the same enemy over and over, with different size and colour variants. However, as previously mentioned, it's the theming that makes it all work: you just don't notice all these shortcomings when you're having a great old time sailing around and getting into fights. Just that one little thing adds so much to a game that would be totally forgettable if it were exactly the same, but the stages just went from one to another in a linear fashion, or were selected from a more traditional menu. Even the loading screens keep it up, telling you the legends of various ludicrously named fictional pirates!

There are a few downsides, of course, and they're ones pretty common in the *Simple 2000* series. There's the aforementioned repetition, of course, both mechanically and visually, and that

IF YOU LIKE THIS TAY...

THE ONEECHANBARA
PLAYSTATION 2

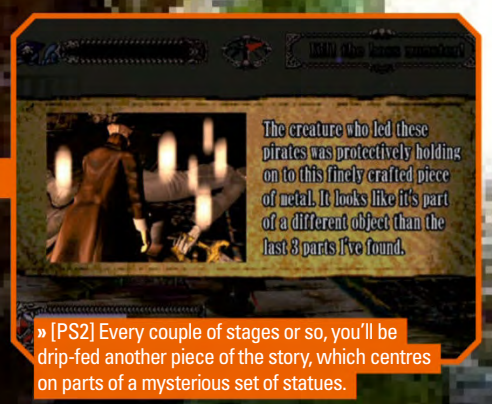
■ One of the big breakout hits of the *Simple 2000* series, this is an infamously gory beat-'em-up that has you slashing up hoards of zombies, and getting drenched in blood while wearing a bikini. It has a whole bunch of sequels and even a couple of live action movies! You can find it in the west as *Zombie Zone*.

THE SAIYUUTOU SARUDEN
PLAYSTATION 2

■ You can tell what was popular at any given time by what got ripped off the most, and the *Simple 2000* series' heyday definitely coincided with that of the *Dynasty Warriors* series, as this is yet another clone. This one's themed around the classic *Journey To The West*, and stars versions of Xuanzang, Sun Wukong and Zhu Bajie.

THE TAIKAI KEMONO
PLAYSTATION 2

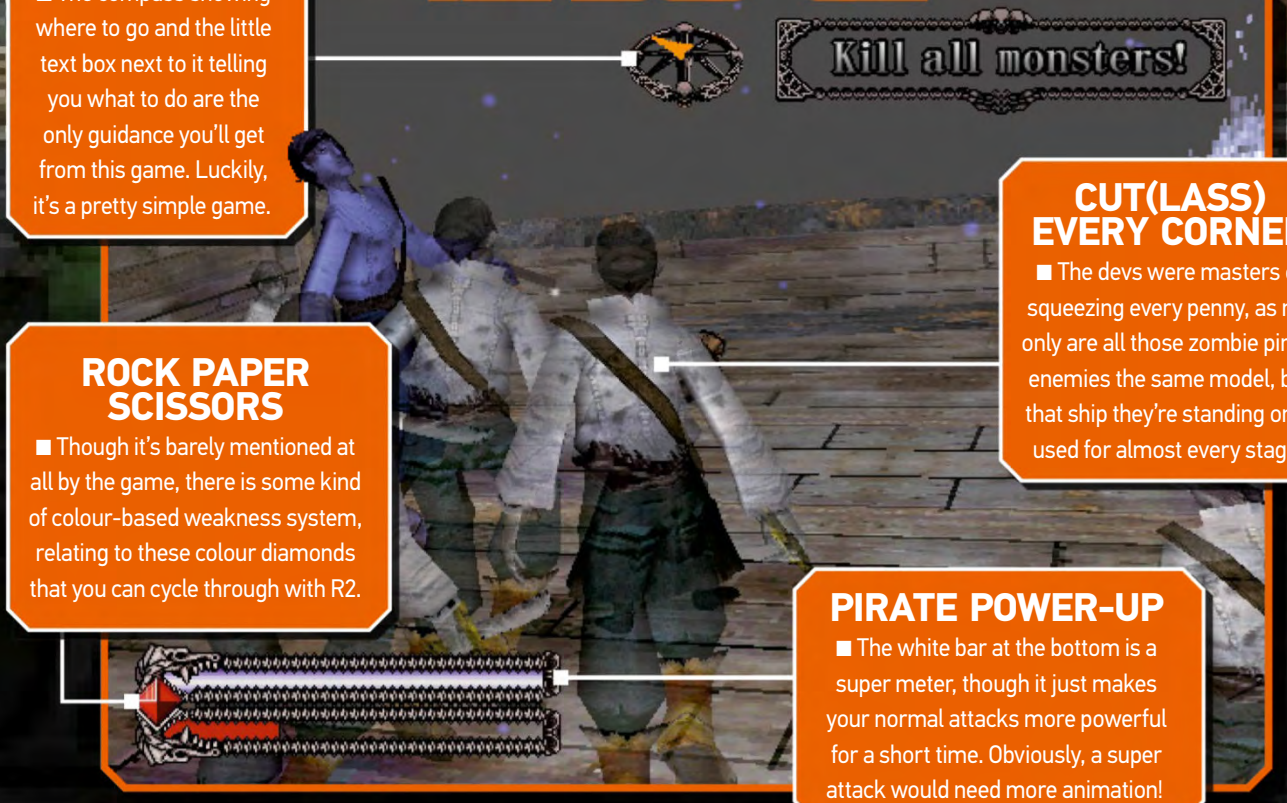
■ If more nautical action is what you seek, this game (released in the west as *Deep Water*) sees you sailing around an impressively big open sea, looking for giant monsters to kill, while fending off attacks from sharks and (non-zombie) pirates. It's far from perfect, but there isn't much else like it.


The creature who led these pirates was protectively holding on to this finely crafted piece of metal. It looks like it's part of a different object than the last 3 parts I've found.

» [PS2] Every couple of stages or so, you'll be drip-fed another piece of the story, which centres on parts of a mysterious set of statues.

really springs from the fact that, like most of these games, the developers had a good idea, and then built the whole game around it, rather than putting together a whole host of ideas into a larger, cohesive whole. But again, it's a budget game, it would be unfair to condemn them for it. As it is, *The Pirate* is a game that's exactly as good as it needs to be, no more and no less. There's even a western release, under the title '*Buccaneer*', though as is often the case with western *Simple 2000* releases, it's both incredibly rare and priced far above its weight class by the scant few sellers that do have it.

IN DEPTH



GUIDING COMPASS
■ The compass showing where to go and the little text box next to it telling you what to do are the only guidance you'll get from this game. Luckily, it's a pretty simple game.

CUT(LASS) EVERY CORNER
■ The devs were masters of squeezing every penny, as not only are all those zombie pirate enemies the same model, but that ship they're standing on is used for almost every stage.

ROCK PAPER SCISSORS
■ Though it's barely mentioned at all by the game, there is some kind of colour-based weakness system, relating to these colour diamonds that you can cycle through with R2.

PIRATE POWER-UP
■ The white bar at the bottom is a super meter, though it just makes your normal attacks more powerful for a short time. Obviously, a super attack would need more animation!

Minority Report

THE ZOMBIE VS AMBULANCE

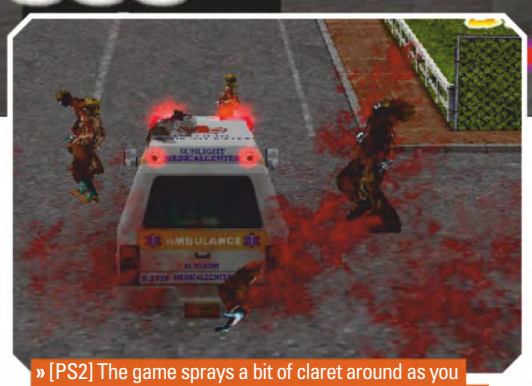
■ PUBLISHER: **VINGT-ET-UN SYSTEMS** ■ YEAR: **2006**

Though a common theme among the *Simple* series is the mockbuster, offering a lower-budget rip-off of a popular game, sometimes you get games that twist that idea a little bit. *The Zombie Vs Ambulance*, though mechanically similar to Sega's *Crazy Taxi*, doesn't try to look or feel like those games in the slightest. Instead, it relies on the outrageousness of its title and concept to sell it.

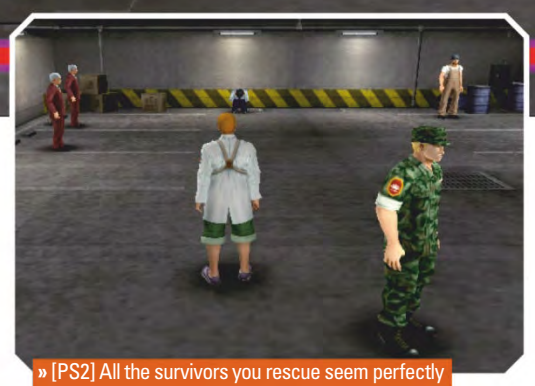
The concept is pretty simple: the city is overrun with zombies, and you play as a paramedic driving around and looking for survivors to fetch back to the safety of the hospital. Survivors have a big glowing circle around them (like in *Crazy Taxi*), and come in various types, all offering something in return for their rescue. For example, soldiers and police officers help protect the hospital while you're gone, and mechanics can develop new parts for your ambulance. For some reason, though, the time it takes for the mechanics to develop these parts is dependent on how many zombies you run over while you're out. Maybe being a mechanic is seen as a bloodthirsty and vengeful profession in Japan? We don't know.

The only big flaw is that it's a pretty long game, and the maps you drive around aren't that big, so you'll be seeing the same old streets over and over again. There's a few boss fights, too, which aren't particularly fun, but they're only a tiny part of the game.

The *Zombie Vs Ambulance* is one of a few *Simple 2000* games that released in the west, renamed generically as '*Zombie Virus*', but the prices it fetches online are a bit more than the game's worth in our opinion. If you see it cheap at a car boot sale, though, that's a different story.



» [PS2] The game sprays a bit of claret around as you mow through clouds of zombies, but it's all far too silly to scare all but the most fainthearted.



» [PS2] All the survivors you rescue seem perfectly content to just loiter around in the hospital car park once you've brought them back.

MORE GAMES TO PLAY

» THE NADESHIKO

■ DEVELOPER: **SPIKE**
■ YEAR: **2004**

■ A common criticism levied towards beat-'em-ups by those who don't know better is that they're all boring, repetitive slogs in which you mindlessly walk right and hit the attack button to fight off hordes of identical goons. Unfortunately, in the case of *The Nadeshiko* (also known as *Dragon Sisters*), it's a criticism that's entirely valid. Tamsoft has made some great beat-'em-ups in its time, but this one isn't among them.

» THE ESCAPE HIGHWAY 2 ~ROAD WARRIOR 2050~

■ DEVELOPER: **TAMSOFT** ■ YEAR: **2006**

■ This is a post-apocalyptic driving game, in which you're tasked with making your way across the ruins of Japan's future, carrying a fragile phial of medicine. You'll have to fight off evil leather-and-spikes-clad goons on wheels and on foot, and it's generally a great time. It's only a few hours long, but those are a good few hours, and there's a few difficulty levels to keep you coming back.

» THE KESSEN SEKIGAHARA

■ DEVELOPER: **TAMSOFT** ■ YEAR: **2004**

■ Clearly meant to be a kind of mockbuster equivalent to Koei's *Kessen* and *Dynasty Warriors* series, it fulfils its job as a poor man's version of those games pretty well. You pick a male or female samurai, and enter the battlefield, slicing up guys until you meet your kill quota for the battle. Oddly, it doesn't seem to matter which side your victims are fighting for, making it something of a strange mass murder sim.

» THE TOKUSATSU HENSHIN HERO

■ DEVELOPER: **DAFT** ■ YEAR: **2004**

■ Inspired by the Japanese tradition of live-action superheroes like Kamen Rider and the Super Sentai teams, with a particular focus on a nostalgic Seventies-style version of the genre, this simple beat-'em-up has you creating your own spandex-clad hero, and beating up legions of identical goons, with the occasional weird monster and even an rival anti-hero thrown in for variety. Not bad, but no classic, either.

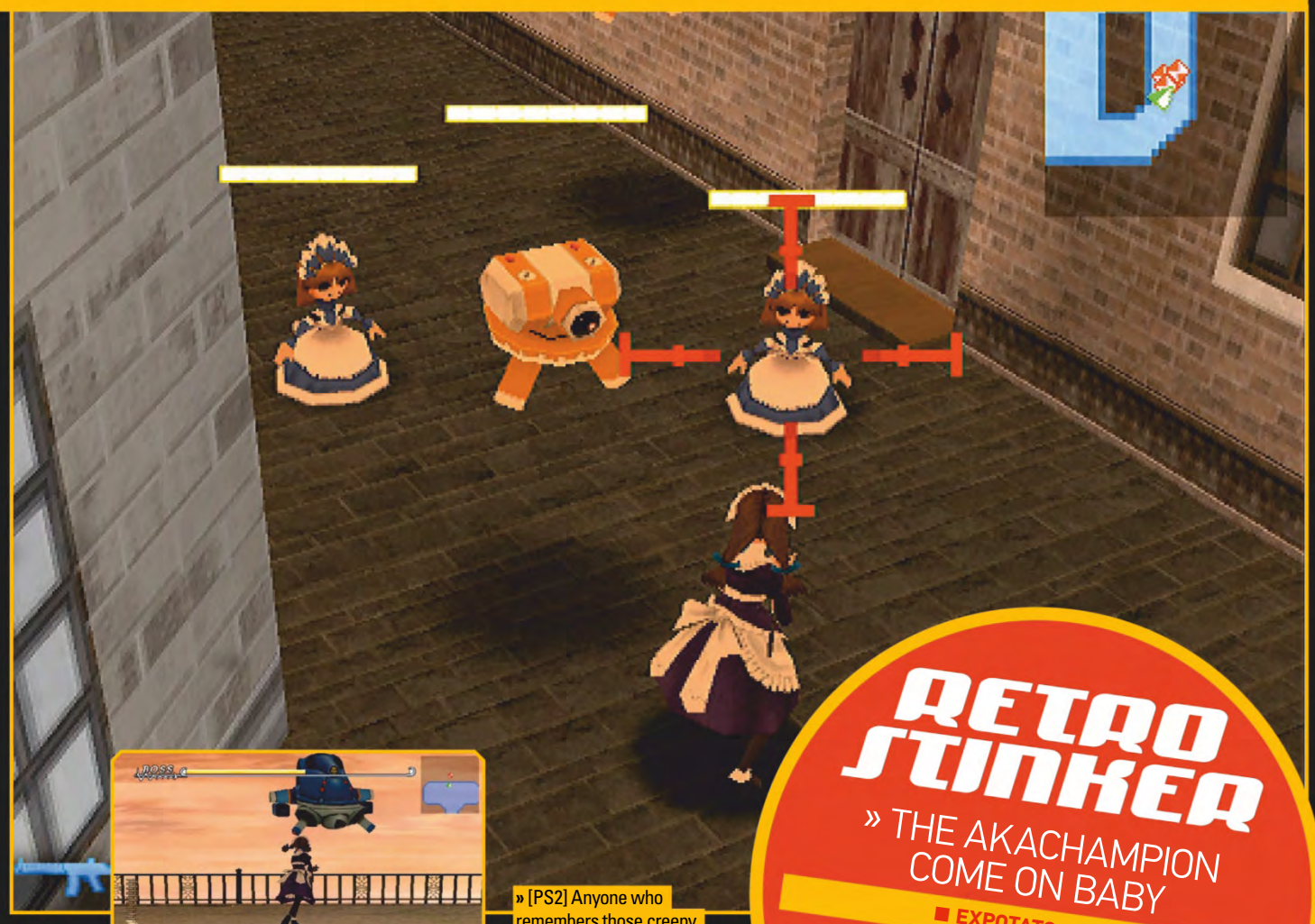
THE MAID UNIFORM AND MACHINE GUN

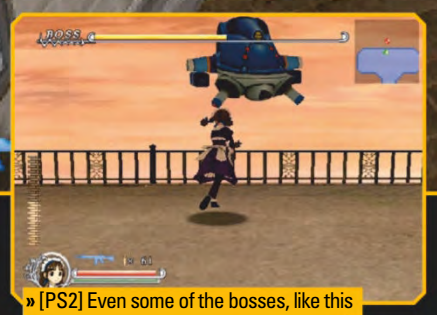
■ PUBLISHER: **RIDEON JAPAN, INC.** ■ YEAR: **2006**

■ **There was something of a maid craze in Japan's nerd culture in the late Nighties, going into the early Noughties, and even to this day there are still maid-themed cafes in places where nerds tend to congregate.** Surprisingly, though, most games that tried to cash in on this trend seem to have been either visual novels, or fan-made PC games with very small print runs. As you might guess from the title, *The Maid Uniform And Machine Gun* bucks those trends by being an all-out action game, starring a maid armed to the frills with a sword, a rifle and, of course, a machine gun.

Other than a few gimmicky stages, like one where you're sniping targets from a mansion window, or shooting from the sunroof of a moving car, most of the game takes the form of a pretty traditional beat-'em-up. You run along, destroy a gang of evil dolls or small UFOs or whatever, then run along to the next area and do it again. It's fast enough that it doesn't feel repetitive or anything, though, and it takes a fair while to outstay its welcome. At the end of each stage, you're ranked and scored on both your combat ability and your 'Maid Style', which seems to be based on how many successful taunts you performed.

This isn't an all-time classic, but it's a cute, fun little game that's worth a look.





» [PS2] Even some of the bosses, like this attack helicopter look like toys. It's a lot cuter than those dolls, at least.

» [PS2] Anyone who remembers those creepy dolls every mum and nana collected in the Nineties will gladly blow away these 'cute' enemies.

RETRO SUNKEN

» THE AKACHAMPION COME ON BABY

■ EXPOTATO ■ 2004

■ A bunch of ugly babies, including a grotesquely racist black stereotype straight from the Thirties take part in a crap knock-off of *Track & Field*. Awful in every way.

» THE KYONSHI PANIC

■ DEVELOPER: **TAMSOFT** ■ YEAR: **2004**

■ The Japanese title is far more apt than the title of this game's rare western release, *Zombie Attack*, since the enemies in the game aren't zombies, but those hopping Chinese vampires with which kung fu movie aficionados may be familiar. You play as a sword-and-gun-toting heroine, running around an infested building rescuing people and such. Unfortunately, it's a bit of a boring slog with damage sponge enemies.

» THE ALL*STAR FIGHTING FESTIVAL

■ DEVELOPER: **TAMSOFT** ■ YEAR: **2005**

■ Amazingly, the *Simple* series was popular enough by its 91st volume to warrant its own crossover fighting game, starring characters from many of the games in this article, and more – most notably, characters from the series' breakout hits: *Earth Defence Force* and *Oneechanbara*! Obviously it's not fit to lace the boots of the likes of *Capcom Vs SNK 2*, but the sheer novelty of the thing makes it worthwhile for 'B-game' fans.

» THE DAIBIJIN

■ DEVELOPER: **TAMSOFT**
■ YEAR: **2004**

■ A completely ridiculous game in which you take control of various military vehicles to protect Japan from a rampaging gigantic bikini model. This was completely slated in the few western reviews it's had (as the name *Demolition Girl*), but it's really not all that bad. It's certainly an example of the adage: 'lower budgets mean that game developers can make any weird idea that comes into their heads', too. One to pick up if you see it dirt cheap.

» THE SPLATTER ACTION

■ DEVELOPER: **VINGT-ET-UN SYSTEMS**
■ YEAR: **2004**

■ Clearly taking some heavy inspiration from Namco's Famicom game *Splatterhouse: Wanpaku Graffiti*, this little beat-'em-up has you going around spilling monsters' guts as a chainsaw-wielding, pumpkin-headed scarecrow boy. It's great fun to play, and it looks amazing, with much higher production values than you'd expect from a budget game and a cute-grotesque cartoon style. Definitely worth checking out.

Future Classic

Modern games you'll still be playing in years to come

Info

- **Featured System:** Nintendo DS
- **Year:** 2008
- **Developer:** Konami
- **Key People:** Koji Igarashi (producer) Michiru Yamane (composer)

Go Deeper

- *Order Of Ecclesia*'s art direction, gameplay and level design can be traced back to *Symphony Of The Night* and *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*.
- This is the first *Castlevania* game in the official chronology to feature a female lead in the form of Shanoa.

» [Nintendo DS] This *Castlevania* entry doesn't mess around. You'll have to play well if you hope to vanquish this horrible night!

The Castlevania series has a rich history, which was established through its time spent on the NES. Did Konami extract the best bits from Simon's Quest and RPG-style Castlevania games, to produce the definitive finale to the Nintendo DS trilogy?

Words by George Sturgeon

CASTLEVANIA: ORDER OF ECCLESIA

THE BACKGROUND

After the release of 2006's *Castlevania: Portrait Of Ruin*, the development team at Konami sought to once again take up the Vampire Killer whip, and have another swing at re-evaluating what the ultimate *Castlevania* experience should be. Yet, instead of trying to put another spin on the beloved PlayStation classic *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night*, Iga's team seemed to turn towards *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest* on the NES for further inspiration. The game was well received at the time, but has since gained a somewhat mixed reception from fans due to a few shortcomings, such as complex level design and townspeople that give confusing hints about where to go next. However, instead of throwing out the parts that didn't quite work from *Simon's Quest*, the minds at Konami made them shine on the Nintendo DS hardware.

Taking the remodelled elements from *Simon's Quest* and combining them with the framework of the 1997 PlayStation classic *Symphony Of The Night* might have seemed absurd to anyone who had played the original NES trilogy back in the day. *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest* had nonlinear level design and tough NES-style difficulty, but Konami managed to knock it out the park when combining both styles together. The result of these efforts was *Castlevania Order Of Ecclesia*.

THE GAME

Getting straight to the story, the Belmont Clan has vanished, and in its absence the Ecclesia organisation has taken up the centuries-old mantle of keeping Dracula at bay. Ecclesia's weaponry comes in the form of Glyphs: magical runes which are a coalescence between weapons, skills and the Dual Crush system which will be familiar to those who played the previous two DS games. Luckily, Ecclesia also has a useful ally in the form of warrior Shanoa, the only member of the organisation able to harness Glyphs to their full capacity.

» [Nintendo DS] Shanoa takes a rest from monster slaying. These opportunities don't appear very often.

» [Nintendo DS] Much like other 'Igavania' titles, Shanoa can wield an array of weapons.

» [Nintendo DS] Screen-filling attacks are always a joy to see and make you feel like a certified badass.

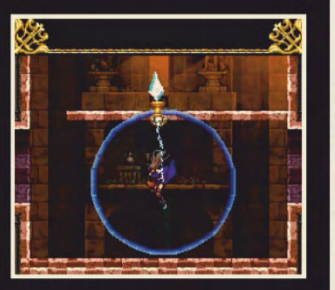
Things of note

PIXEL PERFECT

The vivid pixel art and backdrops in each environment replicate the great Gothic architecture, and parallax scrolling effects add to the polish of the game.

HEIRO-GLYPH-ICS

Shanoa is able to wield 'Glyph Unions' – a monster-crushing array of special spells that take effect by equipping different combinations of Glyphs.



ROLL OVER BEETLEHOVEN

Order Of Ecclesia boasts massive bottom-screen-filling boss monsters such as the grotesque Earth Beetle Arthroverta and the ominous Demon-Horse Rider Eligor.

ORDER(S) OF ECCLESIA?

Quests that Shanoa will gain throughout the game include photographing various creatures, playing hide-and-seek, or completing fetch-quests.

HASTA LA VISTA!

Visiting rural environments, such as Ruvas Forest, the Tymeo Mountains and the perilous Kalidus Channel, are a rarity for *Castlevania* games – a series which has a clear love for castles.

Unfortunately, during a ceremony to bind Ecclesia's most powerful Glyph 'Dominus' to Shanoa, fellow disciple Albus steals the Glyph, leaving Shanoa with a bad case of amnesia and a lack of emotions. Taking control of Shanoa your task is clear: track down Albus, reclaim the Dominus Glyph and stop Dracula's return.

The elements in this game that appear to be inspired by the black sheep of the series *Simon's Quest* include the return of a town setting populated by NPCs. Thankfully their cryptic clues have been replaced by far more useful quest opportunities. At a certain point, players are presented with a level map to select their next stage. It's here where the game takes a more linear approach than its predecessors, but don't get any ideas that this is a limited *Castlevania* experience with small and enclosed levels. This Nintendo DS entry is polished and caters to both casual players and those who seek to explore.

The Glyph system enables Shanoa to arm herself with up to three Glyphs. The combat system flaunts its biggest improvements to date: Glyph Unions, and applying combined attacks by being able to use both arms. Experiment with the Glyphs you acquire and you'll be able to conjure up icy blizzards or even vaporise your demonic foes to bits with a huge laser-blade. These additions ensure that the flow of combat always feels fast-paced and varied, where it may have been a little slow in previous games due to most main characters only having a single slot to equip a weapon.

Soundtrack and audio-wise, *Order Of Ecclesia* continues to set the bar high. Standout tracks like *Prologue*, and the adventurous *Rhapsody Of The Forsaken* set a standard that remains consistent.

Order Of Ecclesia has a steeper difficulty curve than its predecessors and caters towards more experienced vampire hunters. You need to be strategic with your attacks as this game contains a combat system where all regular attacks sap magic power due to Shanoa's weapons being formed from the Glyphs she absorbs. Bosses are also significantly tougher compared to previous outings and possess punishing patterns of attack: one of which requires you to switch between three sets of Glyphs on the fly. For the hardcore vampire-slayers among you, Boss Medals can be earned for defeating each boss without receiving any damage – a challenge worth undertaking, if you ask us. This feat takes some practice and encourages players to observe and exploit enemy weaknesses – often exploring new combat options.

Replay value pops up in the form of various modes, outstanding villager quests, two end-game secret locations and Ecclesia's various Guides lists. New modes include several Hard Mode options for those seeking even greater challenges, a Boss Rush gauntlet, the Sound Test and Albus Mode which is arguably the most interesting.

WHY IT'S A FUTURE CLASSIC

In simple terms, *Ecclesia* is a Nintendo DS game that built on the success of *Symphony Of The Night*. It took some average ideas from *Simon's Quest*, improved them and added a dash of Eighties arcade-style difficulty reminiscent of the original *Castlevania*. This is a well-delivered conclusion to the Nintendo DS *Castlevania* trilogy. The inspirations drawn from the series' NES origins are well developed and integrated seamlessly into the series established framework that began with 1997's *Symphony Of The Night*.

The innovations are all here: a mix of classic and new enemies, polished and refreshing fast-paced combat with fluid animations, a ton of replay value, and a renewed focus on providing the player with a sense of challenge. For a series with a strong theme of legacy, perhaps Konami's last Nintendo DS outing for the series was designed to be a return to what made the original such a big hit back in the Eighties. ✱

THE HISTORY OF The SIMS™

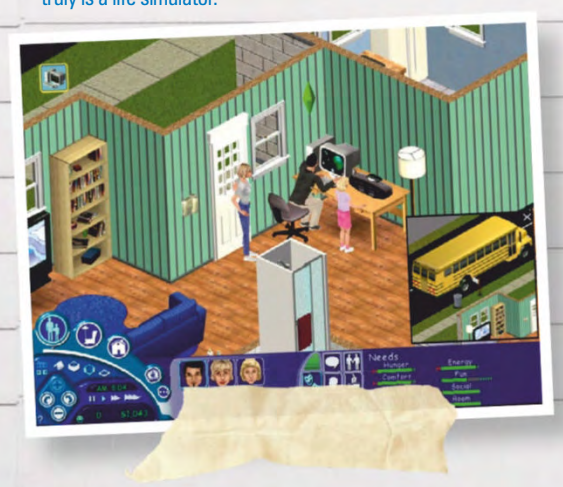
As a franchise, The Sims is unique in its space, letting players live out the fantastical lives they wish they had, tell dramatic tales worthy of a soap opera, or simply continue the same mundane daily routine that they have in real life. We explore the one-sided history of the life simulator

Words by Adam Barnes

» Chris Trottier was assistant producer on *The Sims* and was also involved with *The Sims: Online*.

The Sims, a franchise that has sold over 100 million copies across its various releases, is one of those rare games that can only have been possible because of the developer it came from; *The Sims* would never have happened if not for Maxis. While the story of how the original *Sims* actually came to be is fairly well reported at this point, what isn't so well known is how the mishmash of developers at Walnut Creek, California helped to shape the franchise into what it is today. "*SimCity* was really the engine that powered the independent Maxis studio," recalls Charles London, who was hired very early on for the project as art director. "And there were a constellation of games at that time that went along with it: *SimSafari*, *SimAnt*, *SimTower*, *SimLife*, *SimEarth*. They had various levels of success, but none of them even approached the magnitude of *SimCity*." The success of the city-building game had propelled Maxis – and with it Will Wright – into the spotlight, and though efforts were made to bank on that success, Will was still working on projects and ideas that primarily interested him. In 1991, after the release of *SimAnt* and inspired by Christopher Alexander's 1977 book on architecture and urban design, *A Pattern Language*, Will set about creating a game *about* architecture. The core purpose of the game was to build an effective house, a structure whose design and layout would facilitate the behaviour of the characters within. "Early on it just felt kind of peculiar, you know?" says Chris Trottier, assistant producer on *The Sims,* working closely with Will to help with the game's creation. "Will's goals for it was that it was about efficiency and architectural layout and that the people were just there as a byproduct, the people were almost what measured your success in setting things up efficiently."

It was through this concept that the term 'dollhouse simulator' would come to be coined, and though initial focus testing had stunted development of the title, it would still take up much of Will's attention. "I was hired for the team when there were only five people working on it," remembers Charles. "It was Will, Jim Mackraz, and three engineers: Jamie Dorenbos, Eric Bowman and Don Hopkins." Charles adds that the game at that point was "incredibly primitive", but noted that while it had very little to it the "potential of a game that was intended to be that open ended was really something else, I had never heard anything like it". The ▶



» [PC] Here's our Darran Sim ignoring his family just so he can cram in some gaming before work. *The Sims* truly is a life simulator.

» [PC] After all the expansion packs, the original neighbourhood increased from ten up to 40 lots.

» Charles London started off on *The Sims* as art director. He's now a senior creative director at EA.

» [PC] For some *The Sims* was about designing buildings, for others it was about telling stories or achieving career goals. Will Wright's love of open-ended gaming succeeded the most with *The Sims*.

Family History

A guide to the best Sims families

Goth

Easily the most famous of all the premade *Sims* families, the Goth household has featured in every single game and had quite a timeline to go along with it. Bella and Mortimer were the originals that were pretty much the first to greet any new family, but went on to lead quite a mysterious life in later titles.

Caliente

Introduced in *The Sims 2*, the Caliente twins come with some soap opera drama, arriving on the scene the very same night that Bella Goth disappears. On top of that, Dina Caliente is in love with Mortimer Goth – who is older, but hardly a poor man – while also having a fling with her neighbour Don Lothario, who is also her sister's boyfriend.

Newbie

Most will remember the Newbie family not for their exciting personalities or dramatic storylines, but rather the simple fact that they're used as the introductory family to help teach newcomers how to play *The Sims*. The family appears in many of the games – including the console versions – though not always as a tutorial.

Pleasant

First introduced as part of *The Sims: Pets* expansion pack and the first family to include a family dog, the Pleasant family actually featured far more prominently in *The Sims 2*. Despite their wholesome family image and comfortable finances, the Pleasant family comes with adulterous affairs with the maid, rebellious teenage daughters and one member on the brink of losing their job.

Landgraab

As 'old money', the Landgraabs have a long history within the world of *The Sims* as business tycoons and real estate magnates. The name is featured a number of times throughout the series, in object descriptions and even has buildings in *SimCity 3000* owned by Landgraab Industries. Malcolm Landgraab is even the main villain of the console spin-off, *The Sims: Bustin' Out*.

Burb

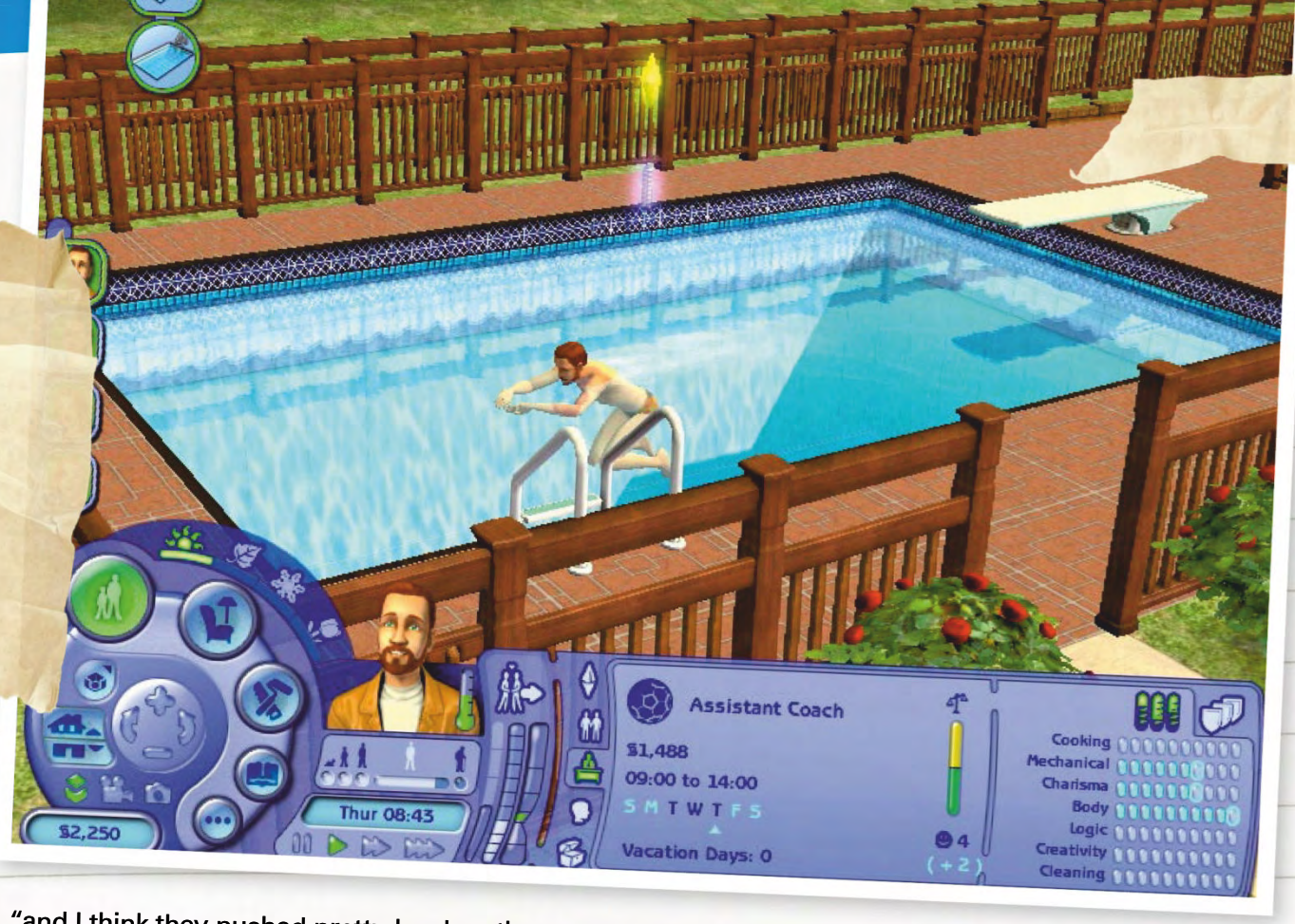
Living the idyllic Fifties, white picket fence lifestyle, the Burbs moved to these sleepy corners of the *Sims* world to escape *SimCity* life. Though there isn't much drama in the family, it does come to be involved with most of the residents of *The Sims 2*'s Pleasantville region and are a recognisable name for any Sim player.

problem was, however, that this new concept simply wasn't an obvious hit from the start, with the management of Maxis initially considering scrapping the project. Even when EA became involved after buying out the studio, there was always a need to fight for its continued existence. "Electronic Arts had a lot of serious people in the gaming industry who needed to see it, needed their input and I had to deal with them," explains Jim Mackraz, the director of development for the original game. "They were uncomfortable with a title like that," he adds. "Everybody was uncomfortable with a game about a dollhouse, everybody was uncomfortable about a game that would appeal to girls because they thought that was a kiss of death. So most of my time was just trying to keep the thing alive and dealing with all the scepticism within the organisation."

Despite having to constantly face the threat of cancellation, EA's purchase of Maxis did bring with it a little extra stability that just wasn't possible while Maxis was beginning to struggle as an independent developer. EA cancelled titles that the developer was working on that it didn't see as viable products, with *The Sims* only staying in production primarily thanks to Will's involvement with the project and Jim's motivation to keep the game in development. As a result of these cancellations, many staff members found themselves a part of the growing *Sims* team, and it was here that the game took a turn. "Will had designers that he was working with on that team, Roxy Wolosenko and Claire Curtin," says Chris,

» [PS2] It took a few years after the release of the PC original for a console port to happen, and *Bustin' Out* did a fine job of bringing the experience over.

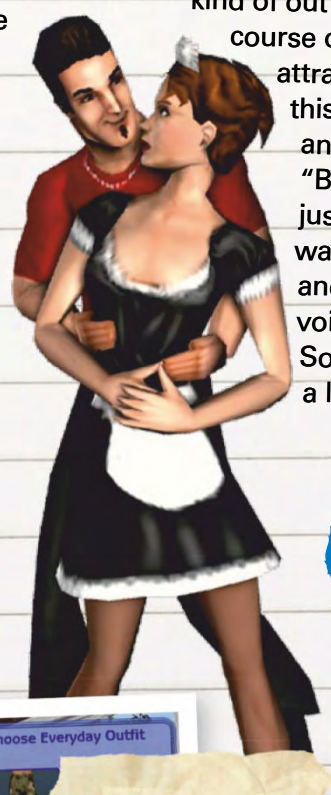
» [PC] The series has always been about voyeurism to a degree, and nothing says that more than watching a northerner take a bubble bath in his flat cap.



"and I think they pushed pretty hard on these people being as compelling or more compelling than the layout of the stuff. I think that was lucky for him, they were bringing this very human perspective to something that had started off as a bit of an oddball experiment." The focus of the game shifted naturally as it became clear that manipulating the lives of these little people was more entertaining than building their home. "Will's great strength was that he took ideas from everybody around him," explains Charles, "he was very open. He let everyone collaborate." With this outlook, the game shifted to allow for a set of motives that essentially dictated the moods and desires of the Sims, and with it the actions that were needed.

EA's concern about the project wasn't solely based on its concept as a dollhouse simulator, however. "One thing about simulators is that they're no fun until they're tuned," says Jim, "and that was a huge problem for EA because as they started taking the game more seriously, the financial leader of the studio would play the thing all the time and it wasn't any fun. Will would say that *SimCity* wasn't any fun until six weeks before it shipped, and EA's position was that they just couldn't live with that." There was a turning point close to the end of development, though, that alleviated EA's concerns and helped Maxis to feel a little more justified in its determination. "That manifested at E3," says Jim, "where everything went huge."

Historically E3 has always been a loud, brash affair for publishers, and 1999 was not much different. EA was ostentatious, its presence on the show floor dominated by a wrestling ring where the likes of Goldberg were regularly hyping up the crowd with live matches. *The Sims*, however, was barely there. "We were in this weird little back area of EA's booth at E3, right across from where they were having wrestling matches," says Chris, "we were in this tiny space, kind of out of the way." Despite that, over the course of the show *The Sims* managed to attract more and more attention, word of this innovative life simulator spreading and garnering more interest as a result. "By the end of the show people were just piled out into what was essentially a walkway. There were just rows of people and we were just trying to project our voices. We were completely hoarse[…]. So that was the turning point, and I think a lot of people realised then, too."



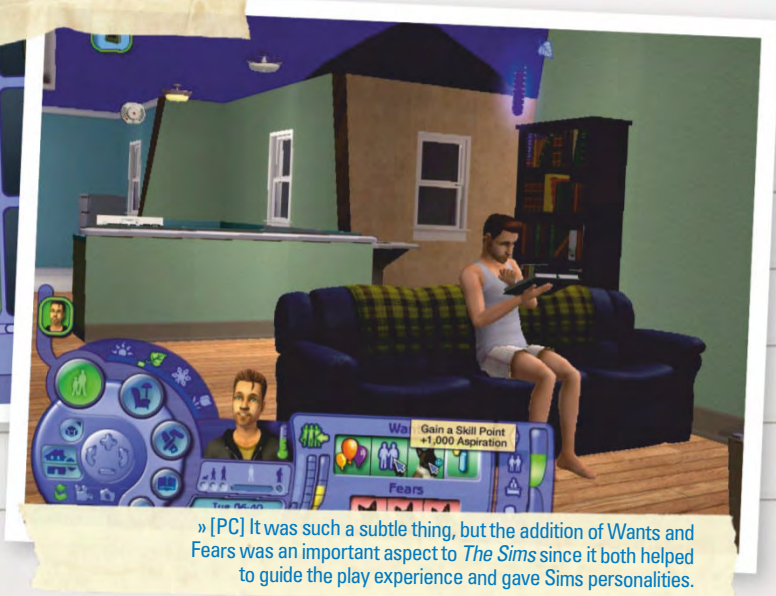
Releasing on PC in 2000, *The Sims* was an almost immediate success. Critics loved its captivating simulation of life, while gamers of all types found enjoyment in recreating themselves, their families and their friends – or even their foes. It remained on the top of the sales charts for years until, in 2002, it knocked off *Myst* as the previous best-selling PC game of all time.

While the broader demographic certainly helped, the voracious demand for *The Sims* meant that extra content was needed. Whether it was community modding, free downloadable objects provided by Maxis – such as the infamous Guinea Pig and its associated disease – or the release of several expansion packs, the options for players to expand their range of storytelling tools was immense. "I remember Will being really dubious about expansion packs," recalls Chris, "he was like, 'It seems like we've done this thing, I don't want to milk it for any more than it's worth. I don't get why people would want that.'" That's why the game's first expansion pack, *Livin' Large*, was such a hodgepodge of unusual things, like the Tragic Clown that would enter a household and unintentionally upset family members or the genie in a bottle that could grant wishes. "We were like, 'Well, at least we can make it strange,'" adds Chris. "With the next few expansion packs, that's when we realised that people were really getting into coming up with dream houses or fantasy lives or whatever. Once we had a lot of player feedback like that, it was a lot easier to know what veins to tap."

The original game was accompanied by seven expansion packs in total, each releasing roughly six months apart until the end of 2003. In December of 2002, however, an anomaly of sorts would be released, one that had hoped to bring the social elements of MMOs that were rising in popularity at the time over into *The Sims*. "What was interesting to us was the things that were happening alongside the gameplay [in MMOs]. Like the events that players would host, or in-game marriages, the guilds and the closeness of the relationships that formed outside of the mechanical game tracks," explains Chris, who at this point was Will's design partner on this socially driven, online *Sims* experience. "Our big bet on *The Sims Online* was what if the game was just about that? It may have been a questionable bet, but it's what we pursued." Despite the frantic appeal the franchise ▶

> "EVERYBODY WAS UNCOMFORTABLE WITH A GAME ABOUT A DOLLHOUSE, EVERYBODY WAS UNCOMFORTABLE ABOUT A GAME THAT WOULD APPEAL TO GIRLS BECAUSE THEY THOUGHT THAT WAS A KISS OF DEATH"
>
> JIM MACKRAZ,

» [PC] The move to 3D was a revolution for the game, not least because it helped enable closer details for the Sims themselves – and that only made them more believable.



» [PC] It was such a subtle thing, but the addition of Wants and Fears was an important aspect to *The Sims* since it both helped to guide the play experience and gave Sims personalities.

"There was a lot of pressure in something being very successful and wanting to do right by it. But it was also ambition, because The Sims 2 was really going out of its comfort zone in going to 3D"
—Lucy Bradshaw

had already garnered, the hype surrounding an online *Sims* title and the great PR that was getting people excited, *The Sims Online* was not well received. It was criticised for its lack of things to do due to the design decision to emphasise the social aspect of playing online.

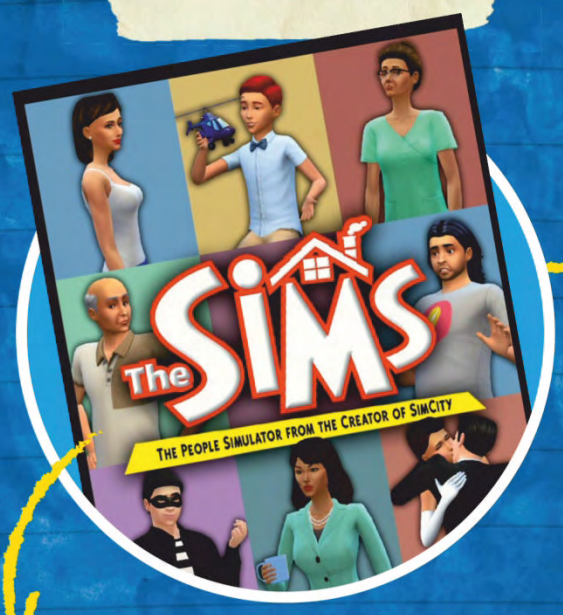
"It was a fundamentally different experience than when working on *The Sims*," says Chris of working on the first new release since the original. "There was a feeling in the company that it could not lose, that it would automatically do well and that it had to do well. So there was a lot more pressure on it." Understandably then, when it came to producing a fully fledged sequel there was a concerted effort within Maxis to go above and beyond what was expected of the developer. It was once again a single-player experience, but computer hardware had grown significantly since 2000 and so it was a technical challenge as much as anything else. Charles, who was creative director on *The Sims 2*, explains that there was one big switch that drove everything on the sequel. "It was all real-time 3D, which was a fascinating technical pipeline to achieve that. This meant that we were able to move the camera fluidly, that the first real machinima could be made with the game, real-time lighting. There was a lot we were doing that was cutting edge."

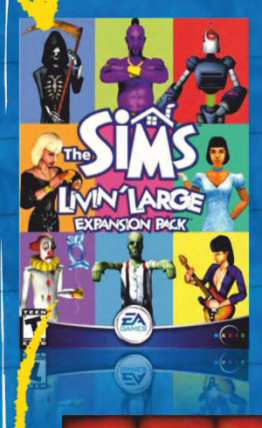
The move to 3D had a far-reaching effect on the game, but crucially it allowed for better believability to be built into the characters. As Lucy Bradshaw puts it, players "were investing identity into the Sims and so a lot of time was going into the Create-A-Sim." Fans of the franchise will likely know of Lucy who, in the years that followed, would go on to oversee a lot of the direction of *The Sims* and Maxis as a whole. She was the director of the sequel, however, and alongside the team had helped to cultivate a greater ability for players to tell stories with the game and add more individual personalities to these digital people. As part of this, the concept of time was introduced; now Sims could age, and that opened up a whole new concern to deal with. "I realised when we made this decision that we had a very interesting problem," says Charles. "Because Sims were now going to give birth to other Sims and those Sims were then going to grow up, it was very possible that you could be playing a game of *The Sims* and have all of the Sims in your house having never gone through Create-A-Sim. And yet we needed you to believe in them, we needed you to believe that they were unique individuals." This was handled in two ways: first, a genetic system that would mean that the offspring of a couple would bear resemblances to their parents, and the second being the Wants and Fears mechanisms that would reward – or punish – the player for making certain events take place based on that Sim's personality. The combination of these two alongside advanced building options and a greater focus on enabling storytelling for the players ultimately led to a huge generational step up from what came before. As a result, the already popular franchise reached a new level of adoration when it was released in 2004, selling one million copies in the first ten days – a record at the time – and going on to reach a huge 4.5 million in its first year alone.

"*The Sims 2* was harder," admits Lucy. "There was a lot of pressure in something being very successful and wanting to do right by it. But it was also ambition, because *The Sims 2* was really going out of its comfort zone in going to 3D. It was brutal at times, there were definitely crunch periods. We were definitely working toward delivering something on a schedule that was probably more ambitious than it was sane." There was a sense that *The Sims 2* had to really prove itself not only to EA – who Charles remembers constantly asking for "everything to be 'ten times'; all it meant was impossible standards" – but also to the fans of the original game. "You could argue that *The Sims 2* was over-engineered and that we over-delivered," he adds. "There was more in that game than absolutely was necessary, but thank god there was, because it laid the foundation for *Sims 3* and *Sims 4*."

With the concept of expansions having been already proven with the original game, EA now placed greater demands on Maxis for following the sequel up with additional content packs. Over the course of four years, eight expansion packs were released, in addition to the introduction of '*Stuff*' packs – content releases focused solely on adding in

» [PC] Object positioning was a revelation for diehard fans when *The Sims 3* released: objects at angles! Multiple objects on a table! Smaller grid placement! Exciting stuff.





Livin' Large

- The Tragic Clown, for true depression
- Household assistance in robot form
- Genie's Lamp to grant wishes
- Pleading with the Grim Reaper

Hot Date

- New downtown locations to visit
- Go on dates with other Sims
- Inventories for giving gifts
- Restaurants and nightclubs to visit

Unleashed

- Pets added into the game
- Introduces gardening and raccoons to eat out of your trash
- Can build community lots to visit

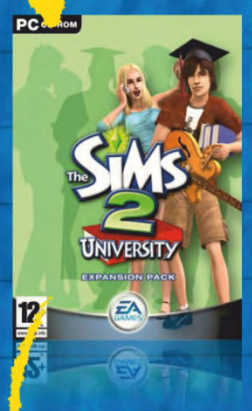
Superstar

- A new career path involving fame
- Studio Town destination to visit
- Cameos from celebrities like Freddie Prinze Jr, Christina Aguilera and Jennifer Lopez.

ESSENTIAL EXPANSIONS

University

- Sims can go to university for the first time
- New 'Young Adult' stage of life
- Play in a band as part of a group
- Live as part of a dorm or in a frat/sorority house

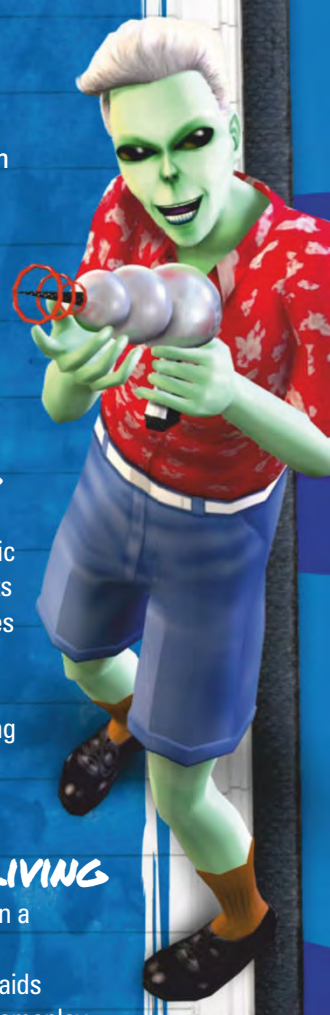


World Adventures

- Travel to remote destinations
- Egyptian mummies, and their curses
- Puzzle-solving tombs and other adventures
- First-person photography

Get Together

- Joinable clubs based on particular interests
- Arcade machines
- Hangout spaces
- WooHoo in a bush



Open for Business

- Sims can open their own businesses
- Craftable items and objects
- Servo robots can be created by Sims
- Elevators can be built into lots

Generations

- Improvements to playing as younger generations
- Sims can prank each other
- Advanced school interactions
- Body hair

City Living

- Careers in social media and as a critic
- Fixer-up apartments or penthouse homes
- Curry-eating contests
- Can attend a gaming convention

Seasons

- Implements changing seasons and temperatures
- Weather effects like rain, thunder and snow
- Green-skinned 'Plant Sims' added
- Lily Allen's *Smile*, sung in Simlish

Into The Future

- First futuristic themed expansion pack
- Time travel to the future
- Events in the future change based on the present
- Hoverboards and jet packs

Island Living

- Sims can live on a tropical island
- Playable mermaids
- Water-based gameplay with boats, canoes and snorkelling
- First non-binary character

Apartment Life

- Sims can live in apartments rather than houses
- Reputation meter
- Can become a witch or a warlock
- Roommates from different families are possible

» [PC] The open world nature of *The Sims 3* meant you went to work at an exact location, bought recipes from an actual bookstore or played chess with a stranger in the park.

» [PC] As a fun bit of metagaming, Sims have always been able to play EA titles on their computers – in some cases they've even played *The Sims*.

new stuff for your Sims to buy – of which nine were released. While Maxis had pushed itself harder than ever on *The Sims 2*, the success of that work meant that EA wanted to capitalise on the popularity. This of course meant a slew of additional content packs, but it also meant maximising where the game could be played. The original game had been ported over to PS2, Xbox and GameCube in 2003, and so the sequel followed suit in 2005 alongside portable versions on GBA, Nintendo DS and PSP – each with gameplay distinct from one another and very much unlike the PC version. When it came to *The Sims 3*, however, Maxis had been stretched thin. The team had expanded way beyond the 20 or so that had worked on the original, while the excessive work involved with pumping out expansion packs had meant many of the core developers that had helped shape the franchise into what it was had left the team, either to work with Will on *Spore* or to go elsewhere within the games industry. As a result, there was less transformative work done on the third *Sims* game; a standard had been set and in many ways the intense popularity of the game limited what was possible. *The Sims 3* released in 2009 and brought incremental changes rather than the sweeping improvements of the second game. Wants and Fears became Wishes, a similar system that allowed for special items based on overall lifetime happiness. Greater levels of customisation were possible, while the build tools were enhanced for more flexibility in building design. The biggest change was the open world, however, which allowed Sims to step outside their door and explore without needing to first choose where they wanted to go from a menu. It gave the game a more neighbourly feeling to it, while the game could even be set to allow the lives of other families to continue while playing as another. The refined systems were well received, with *The Sims 3* going on to sell 1.4 million copies in its first week alone. The familiar template of expansion and *Stuff* packs followed, with eleven of the former and nine more of the latter releasing across four years.

> "A decision had been made at a very high level that *The Sims 4* would be a real-time multiplayer game" – Charles London

Where *The Sims 3* had been a refining of what made the franchise so popular, the next game was set to be rather more ambitious in its goals. Development began shortly after *The Sims 3* released, and could have been the most dramatic rethinking of the franchise yet. "A decision had been made at a very high level that *The Sims 4* would be a real-time multiplayer game," says Charles, who had returned to Maxis and was leading the design of this new *Sims* concept. "Simultaneously, the decision was also made that it would ship at a particular moment in time. Once you have a fixed ship date, you have to back schedule everything and that's what drives the speed at which you ramp up the game. But turning *The Sims* into an MMO is a radical rethinking of the core design, far more than *Sims 2* or *Sims 3* was. *The Sims 2* was an expansion of the core design, *Sims 3* was an expansion of the *world* in which that design lived." This multiplayer concept was dropped, and not because of the mechanisms of its design but rather how the large costs of the expanded team had increased the risk for EA. "A rethinking of a core design of that intensity does not happen on a timetable," Charles says, "it requires prototyping after prototyping. It happens when it happens, and that activity can only happen with a very small team that can move quickly and make limber decisions because they're not afraid of 30, 40, 50 or 100 people waiting for their decisions so they can do their work."

Live To Work: The best career paths to take

The Sims

In the original game, the military career is a great job to start off with while you search for a better alternative since it has the highest initial salary of any career. The entertainment track will offer up the most money per day by the end, though, made all the better by the fact that you'll only work for five hours a day.

The Sims 3

The criminal career track is always tempting to *Sims* fans, and in *The Sims 3* the master thief is the most lucrative on a per-hour-worked basis. You'll even be able to sneak about and steal while at work. However, while the business track doesn't pay well on a per-hour basis, the ability to hold a meeting – and earn a lump sum in the process – certainly helps add to the baseline profit.

The Sims 2

Social Sims might want to consider the slacker career track, which doesn't pay well but it doesn't tie you down very much. It does mean working nights, mostly, but it'll give you plenty of free time to enjoy life. If money is your aspiration, then the top of the business career will score you §4,200 per day but you'll find yourself working hard for it.

The Sims 4

Unique to the fourth game, the stylist branch is one of the more profitable jobs you can get, and you won't have to work too many hours for it, either. However, the *City Living* expansion pack added social media influencer as a career option and as might be the case for the big influencers in real life, you don't have to work very much to earn a large amount here.

» [PC] *The Sims 4* was streamlined, in a way, to make construction and Create-A-Sim feel more tactile and tangible, much like the *SimCity* reboot.

Because of the "inordinate amount of money" that had been spent on the concept, EA felt that the risk was not worth the potential losses that such a dramatic change might bring, no doubt aided by the company's controversial handling of 2013's *SimCity* reboot. Lucy Bradshaw, who had been Maxis's general manager at that time, was brought back on board with *The Sims*. "I came back in after it was struggling to bring it back into something that felt more true to *The Sims*," she recalls, adding that the marketing and focus testing suggested that a multiplayer-only *Sims* game was not going to be favourably received. "I listened to every single interview, I watched every video, and I kept hearing a theme: people were intrigued by a multiplayer Sims but that came hand-in-hand with the Sims having autonomy and the player's control over this world was absolutely core. And so these two things were working in almost direct opposition with one another. The design around the multiplayer side of things, while I do think there's something there, it gave up too much of what was the essential appeal – voyeurism."

Understandably, because of this huge pivoting during its development, *The Sims 4* was not particularly well received when it released in 2014. It lacked the content that fans had grown accustomed to, though most will still admit that the core life simulation was still as compelling as ever. This is the game that EA and Maxis are still working on now, in fact, and after being buffed up with a number of expansion packs, content drops and updates, it's arguably a much improved game today. The latest release, *Island Living* is the game's seventh expansion and is set on a chain of tropical islands where visitors can meet mermaids and pet dolphins. It's continually proof that EA is constantly evolving its game for the audience that plays it. Perhaps Maxis will one day find a way to implement multiplayer into *The Sims* in a way that works, but what is interesting is how the passion and enthusiasm that *The Sims* community has for the series does not seem to have abated. "*The Sims* and *SimCity* will probably be my two great moments of real fulfilment in building games," says Lucy, " and I think it's because of this: it invites you in, you bring yourself to the play experience in ways that have you involved in personalisation. You can watch you play out and it can fascinate you." *The Sims* is unique in its space, even now almost two decades after the dollhouse simulator first hit the shelves, and that's almost certainly due to its universality. "When you have a game that is this eternal," adds Charles, "you can pretty much count on that fact that if you just keep it fresh, then you will always have an audience." ✱

The Spin-offs

Games that used the Sims name, but not the Sims game

The Urbz: Sims In The City

Taking a much more 'urban cool' approach with its style, *The Urbz* was more about building street rep and wicked-sick dance moves – all to the tune of The Black Eyed Peas sung in Simlish. Certain key aspects of *The Sims* does carry over to its gameplay, primarily the motives system and the opportunity to decorate apartments.

It's so nice to see you again, Riley!
I'm so happy you're going to be staying here. Remember, this is your home now so feel free to poke around.
Goal
Wants
$1,325

The Sims Stories

The trio of *Stories* games – *Life, Pets* and *Castaway* – used *The Sims 2*'s engine but was designed for players using laptops and weaker computers. While the traditional mode does exist, the focus is on the more scripted events of each of the games, which uses prompts and the Wants and Fears systems to guide the player.

MySims

This cutesy rendition of *The Sims* brought the concept over to the Wii as a game that is not unlike *Animal Crossing*. It didn't garner much interest – largely due to the lack of the elements of *The Sims* that had made the franchise so popular in the first place – but it did go on to release a number of sequels on Wii and DS.

The Sims Medieval

While the idea of a medieval-themed *Sims* game actually makes sense, that's not what this is. *The Sims Medieval* is more of an action adventure style game, with reduced options for Sim and house creation and a greater focus on heroes and questing. In fact, only hunger and energy remained as motives for the characters.

The Sims FreePlay

As a free-to-play mobile version of *The Sims*, it's easy to see how the gameplay could be negatively affected by the concept. In truth, the core *Sims* experience remained largely intact, but with actions playing out in real-time – so watching a TV show literally takes 23 minutes – it didn't have quite the same fluid sense of progression that many fans would be used to.

Feel The Magic: XX/XY

YOU WANT ME TO DO WHAT?

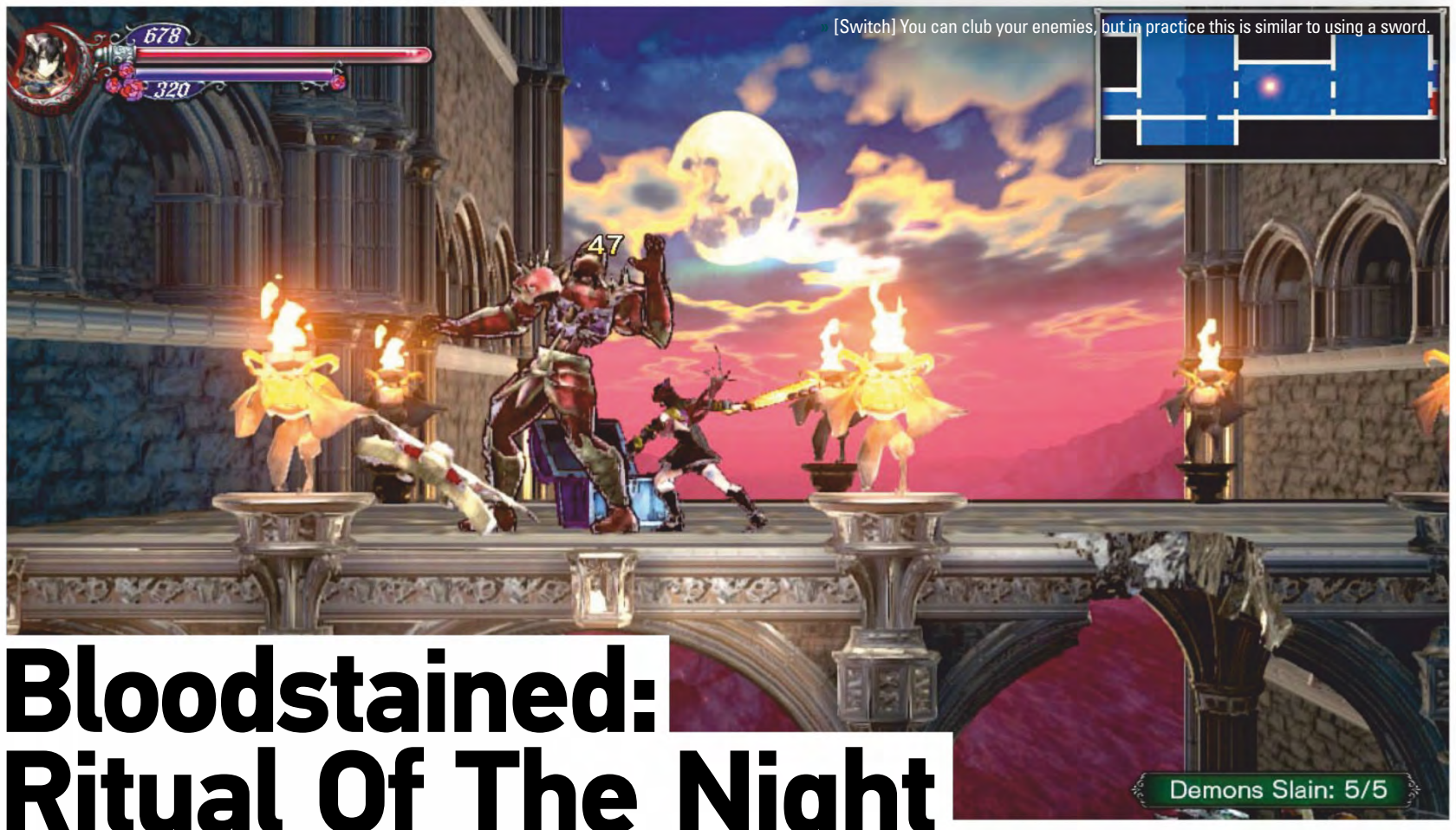
» NINTENDO DS » 2004 » SONIC TEAM

I was tremendously excited about the Nintendo DS when it was first announced. I love portable gaming and Nintendo's new system was offering a different way to play games, which is always a good sell to a hardened old cynic like myself.

Because I was impatient, I decided to order my machine from the USA and I purchased a selection of launch games, including *Super Mario 64 DS*, *Spider-Man 2* and *Feel The Magic: XY/XX*. *Spider-Man 2* was quickly forgotten about because it wasn't very good, *Super Mario* was put on the back burner because it was essentially an old game (although I did love the new minigames), which meant most of my focus for those first few weeks was on *Feel The Magic* (or the dubiously named '*Project Rub*', as it's known over here).

It's a truly bizarre little game, one that's ultimately driven by the power of love, and let's face it, if that's good enough for Huey Lewis And The News and Frankie Goes To Hollywood, it should be good enough for Sonic Team. The delightful stylish cutscenes play out *Feel The Magic*'s admittedly simple story, which essentially revolves around you trying to woo a cute girl you've just met with the help of a group of performance artists called the 'Rub Rabbits'. While many of the included minigames are incredibly basic to perform, they all do a fantastic job of highlighting the strengths of Nintendo's dual-screened handheld, whether it's vigorously rubbing the screen with your stylus to make a man cough up the goldfish he's swallowed, or frantically fanning a flame to keep your would-be girlfriend warm, desperately tapping the screen to fend off rampaging bulls, activating the DS's microphone to blow out candles or make your object of desire notice you by shouting over an inconveniently placed band. It's a delightfully silly game that never gets dull. ✱

>> After what feels like forever, Bloodstained is finally with us, but does it live up to all the hype? We also put Super Mario Maker 2 through its paces, sample Collection Of Mana and get busy with Dragon Quest Builders 2



Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night

STAIN, TRANSITIVE VERB: TO BRING DISCREDIT ON

INFORMATION

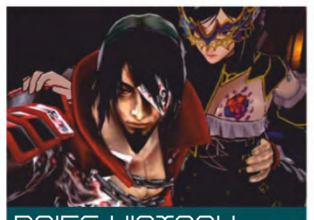
- **FORMAT REVIEWED:** SWITCH
- **ALSO ON:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £34.99
- **PUBLISHER:** 505 GAMES
- **DEVELOPER:** ARTPLAY
- **PLAYERS:** 1

We've been anticipating Koji Igarashi's spiritual successor to his *Castlevania* games for some time now – the original projected release date was March 2017, if you can believe it. Despite the repeated delays, the good news is that *Bloodstained* is one of those Kickstarter projects that displays perfect understanding of what the audience wanted from the game. The way that *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* fused RPG elements with the nonlinear exploratory platforming of games like *Metroid* and *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap* has always been compelling, and the audience wanted that, complete with the horror trappings that other games don't always deliver.

The triumph of *Bloodstained* is that it manages to deliver all of that, and does so in great quantity. The map is enormous, and is interesting to explore with its various regions each having distinct styles of visual design and layout – spiral towers with clockwork platforms give way to a library full of moving platforms, and later a cavernous underground waterway. There are plenty of weapons to try, from the regular swords and whips to more unusual additions such as combat shoes and firearms, and there are many hidden techniques that are revealed as you read from the various bookcases around the castle. Shards, which are primarily collected from defeated enemies, give you plenty of magical powers to explore too. The inclusion of side-quests and crafting mean that you'll have plenty to distract you from the main objective if you want something a little different to do.

Bloodstained is also a refreshingly challenging game. Even the first boss managed to trip us up and kill us a couple of times, and while bosses typically provide the sternest challenges in the game, they're not obnoxious difficulty spikes – you're equally likely to be brought down in combat during regular exploration. Navigating the game is also challenging, and thankfully this is for the right reasons. The map is clear and useful so you'll be able to find your way to your destination, but there's no hand-holding – when you gain new abilities that open up new areas, it's up to you to find out where

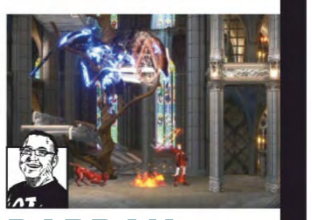
»[Switch] Even some of the regular enemies are big and tricky to deal with, like this dragon.



BRIEF HISTORY

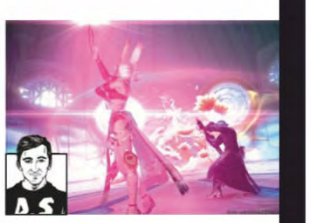
» Following his departure from Konami in 2014, the veteran *Castlevania* series producer Koji Igarashi took *Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night* to Kickstarter in 2015. The game is positioned as a spiritual successor to the more exploratory, RPG-style *Castlevania* games such as *Symphony Of The Night*, and it briefly held the record for gaming projects on the platform as 64,867 backers pledged over $5.5 million to make the game a reality. The rather good prequel game *Bloodstained: Curse Of The Moon* came out as an appetiser last year, with NES-style graphics and a structure similar to *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*.

✱ PICKS OF THE MONTH



DARRAN

Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night
I've got the Xbox One version and feel it's a big improvement over the Switch offering.



DREW

Final Fantasy XIV: Shadowbringers
This MMO expansion is way too big for any of us to review. That said, it's life-consumingly good.

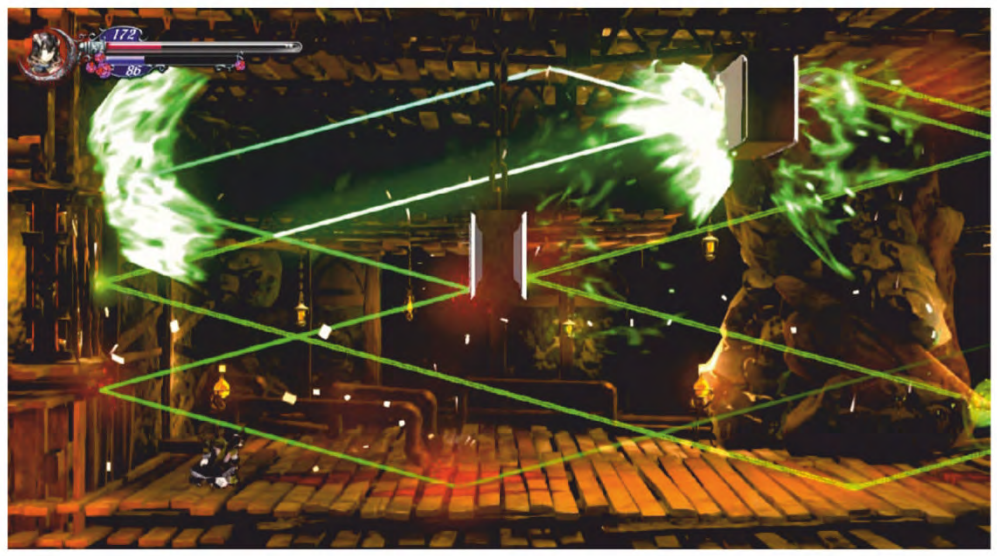
»[Switch] The game's environments are diverse, with these caverns existing close to the ornate castle.

those areas might be. Fast travel points are appropriately limited, and not necessarily positioned right next to save points.

Plenty of people were worried about the game's visuals following the demo for Kickstarter backers, and thankfully the developers have taken the time to address this. The result is an attractive game – Miriam looks excellent and the environments she traverses are always good looking, with certain featured rooms such as the cathedral even being excellent. Unfortunately, the Switch version isn't quite as close a match for the other versions as some recent ports. While the lower resolution and 30fps target were concessions that should have been expected, the texture downgrade is harsher than we would have expected and the image is a little muddy. It looks like this version has been built for portable mode, with little thought given to how well the game holds up on a TV.

The audio is also of a high quality – or rather, the music and sound effects are, as the soundtrack includes contributions from Michiru Yamane and Ippo Yamada and is excellent. Sadly, the voice actors all seem to have studied at the Dick Van Dyke school of British accents. Having said that, some utterances do cross the line into the same sort of hammy appeal that *Symphony Of The Night* achieved with iconic lines such as "miserable little pile of secrets".

Unfortunately the game has been beset by technical problems on all platforms, the worst being crash bugs, which are infrequent but enormously frustrating in a game without auto-saves. Other issues include framerate instability and problems with items becoming stuck and inaccessible. But the Switch version suffers particularly badly here, with plenty of unique problems on display. Loading delays between rooms are somewhat onerous in some places, and become downright painful if you miss your jump to an upper room, while some conversation scenes are affected by glitched backgrounds. But the bigger problem is the high input lag, which conspires with the lower framerate to make the game feel noticeably less responsive on Nintendo's hardware.



»[Switch] As you'd expect, bosses fight using powers that will later prove useful to your exploration of the castle.

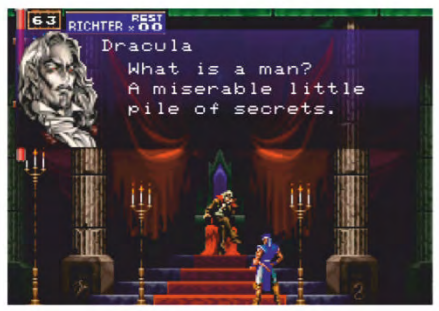
Make no mistake, this is no *Mighty No 9*-style debacle. When the game is flowing properly and you're having fun battling through the castle, it's great – but then you'll hit a crash or an obvious bug, or the game won't respond quite as you want it to, or the performance drops. With proper technical execution *Bloodstained* would be in contention for a Sizzler award, and on other platforms it's much closer to that ideal. But while online claims that the Switch release is 'unplayable' are clearly hyperbolic, we'd be excusing an inexcusable level of technical problems if we rated this particular version any higher. Honestly, the game would have benefited from another delay, as first impressions aren't great. If you're confident that you can tolerate the issues on Switch, you'll probably have great fun with *Bloodstained* – but if you're not, wait for the patches or consider purchasing a different version. ✱

»[Switch] Boss fights are often particularly tricky – if Miriam lands on this blood twister, it'll hurt a lot.

✱ WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD

CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT (PLAYSTATION)



▼ SOMETHING NEW

HOLLOW KNIGHT (SWITCH)

In a nutshell

***Bloodstained* feels like the work of a master returning to his craft in most respects, but technical problems drag the Switch version down. Owners of other platforms should add 10% to this score.**

>> Score **78%**

PICK OF THE MONTH

Super Mario Maker 2

» **System:** Switch » **Buy it from:** Retail, online » **Buy it for:** £49.99

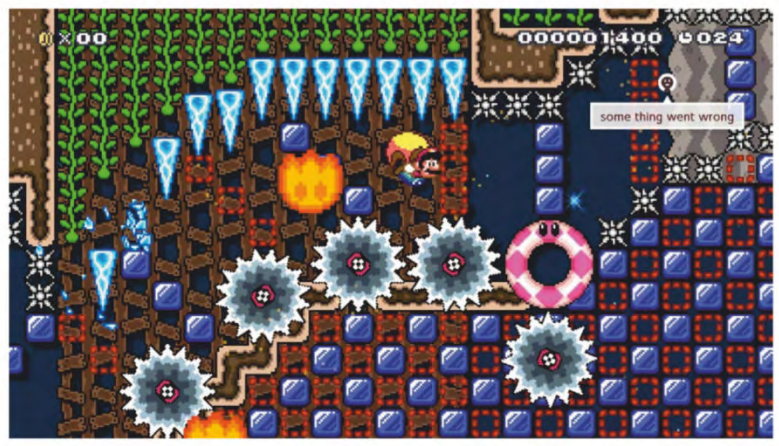
It was inevitable that we'd see a sequel to *Super Mario Maker,* as it was one of the highlights of the often barren Wii U release schedule – and fittingly, this brand-new version incorporates the gameplay of another one of the machine's standout games. The biggest new addition to the game is a *Super Mario 3D World* theme, giving players the option for power-ups like Cat Mario and level features like glass pipes. There are plenty of new tools for creators, too, from seesaws and swinging claws to surprisingly basic things like slopes, allowing players to create stages with the features of Nintendo's own.

Without experience of designing stages, it can be difficult to know how to use these features, so Nintendo has helpfully provided over 100 of its own stages in a neat little story mode, many of which demonstrate the new inclusions in action. These are as well designed as you'd expect from any *Mario* game, and they ensure that you'll have a good time with the game even if you never create a stage. There's no overarching theme though, so it's best if you think of it as an expansion pack for past 2D *Mario* games.

Of course, games like this live and die on their community content, and the fact that this is a sequel gives this an enormous head start – players have already migrated from the original game, and brought their best ideas along with them. It's still harder than we'd like to sort the wheat from the chaff, and few players can design a standard *Mario* stage as well as Nintendo. But there's plenty of fun to be had in the stages that would never fly in an official game – near-impossible super expert courses, tricky little confined space puzzles, bizarre storytelling exercises and the popular 'Auto-Mario' exhibitions. Combined with the more conventional Nintendo-designed stages and the ability to make your own if you're still unsatisfied, *Super Mario Maker 2* presents itself as a great package for any fan of 2D platform games.

>> Score **86%**

» [Switch] This image is from the delightfully comic 'Mario Goes To McDonalds'.



» [Switch] *Meat Boy* masochists will find plenty of difficult stages to tackle.

Collection Of Mana

» **System:** Switch
» **Buy it from:** Retail, online » **Buy it for:** £34.99

24 years since the release of the now-titled *Trials Of Mana* in Japan, fans finally have an officially translated release, and it's packaged with *Mystic Quest* and *Secret Of Mana* in this great, but pricey, collection. Emulation is excellent with crisp visuals and several display options. Sadly scanlines are conspicuous by their absence but audio is top-notch and a sound test is added for each game. The lack of digital maps and manuals let this collection down as both are essential for the Game Boy original. There is a lot to offer *Mana* fans here but we feel this collection could have been even better value with a lower price point, particularly alongside Konami's recent retro collections.

>> Score **79%**

Dragon Quest Builders 2

» **System:** PS4, Switch (tested)
» **Buy it from:** Retail, Online » **Buy it for:** £39.99

The first *Dragon Quest* builders ended up becoming one of our favourite games of 2016, so we're glad Square Enix has followed it up with a sequel. Set in the world of *Dragon Quest II* (after all the heroics of the main game, mind), *Builders 2* gives you an archipelago of new islands to explore. This time, however, your paired up with an amnesiac (of course he has no memory, it's based on a JRPG) character called Maltroth who helps you whack monsters and gather materials. It's a nice evolution of the formula, but the game doesn't seem to trust you to go off and experiment or explore, relentlessly holding your hand for the first stretch – which is pretty jarring for a game that's obviously inspired by *Minecraft*.

>> Score **80%**

Sega Ages: Virtua Racing

» **System:** Switch » **Buy it from:** Online
» **Buy it for:** £5.99

Trust M2 to deliver a version of *Virtua Racing* that's actually better than the arcade original. There have been a fair few versions of Sega's seminal racing game, but none can hold a candle to this sensational effort. In addition to a higher resolution than the arcade original (which makes it look incredibly sharp during play) M2's update increases the framerate to 60, improves the draw distance and makes the original pop-up far less noticeable. Handling is improved and there's now an option to use motion control as well. Multiplayer is present and correct and M2 has worked it's magic to allow up to eight players to play on a single Switch. Add in additional little tweaks and M2 really has gone above and beyond with its latest update.

>> Score **85%**

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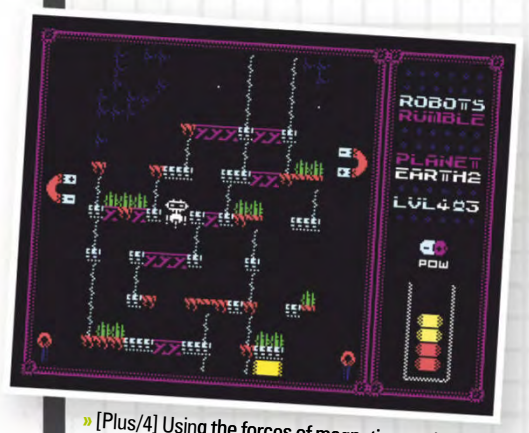
Gamers HOMEBREW

Brewing since 2005

» [C64] Doc Cosmos really felt his age after a spot of time travel.

Gaming NEWS

» [C64] Blast off with *Neutron* to send a message to the invading alien race.



» [Plus/4] Using the forces of magnetism and gravity in *Robots Rumble*.

HEY, HEY 16K

The voting is still ongoing at the time of writing, but the RGCD 16K Cartridge Competition has closed for entries. The rules for this one are pretty simple: games have to fit into a 16K cartridge but are free to use all of the C64's memory once up and running. That might sound limiting but, as with previous instalments of this competition, there have been some corkers contributed so here are a couple of titles which caught our attention.

There are a few puzzlers to choose from including a match-three style game called *Vegetables* where tiles must be shuffled around to make horizontal or vertical lines which in turn are removed from the playfield. *Robots Rumble* is another brain taxer, but more action-oriented, with the player controlling two magnets and using them to pull robots horizontally across the screen while gravity takes care of moving them downwards.

Doc Cosmos is a platformer but with an unusual twist; the titular hero arrives on an alien world in search of a temporal shift device which he soon finds, but in order to escape he'll need to put that hardware to good use. There are differences to the map between time zones so the good doctor must flip back and forth – toggling between modern and PETSCII graphics in the process – to open up routes through the cave system which weren't otherwise available.

If these all seem too mentally stimulating there's a couple of entries very much aimed at the twitch gamers as well, with the nicest of these being *Neutron*, a shooter inspired by Tehkan's 1984 arcade classic *Star Force* which features some good graphics throughout. *Let's Invade 2* is another blaster, this time a variant on *Space Invaders* offering different attack formations, enemies that require multiple shots to kill and a pounding in-game soundtrack. All of the entries can be found at the official competition page on Itch.io behind Kikstart.me.uk/rgcd-2019.

The C64 isn't the only Commodore 8-bit platform which has benefitted from the RGCD competition either, because developer Digital Monastery have released ports of its entry *Robots Rumble* for the expanded VIC-20 and Plus/4 – Kikstart.me.uk/robots-rumble-vic and Kikstart.me.uk/robots-rumble-264 respectively – with the latter machine also receiving a conversion of *Lala Prologue* as well which is at Kikstart.me.uk/lala-prologue-264.

NEW GAMES NEEDED

If you have a homebrew project you would like to see featured then please contact us at: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

HOMEBREW HEROES

We looked at Juan J Martinez's puzzle platformer Night Knight last month and, since it was his first MSX game, had a few questions for him about developing for the machines in that series

***Night Knight* is your first game for the MSX series, what drew you to that particular platform?**
I have few friends that are hardcore fans of the MSX, so I guess it was matter of finding time to learn more about it. Given that I already had developed for other Z80 based systems, it was easy to get started.

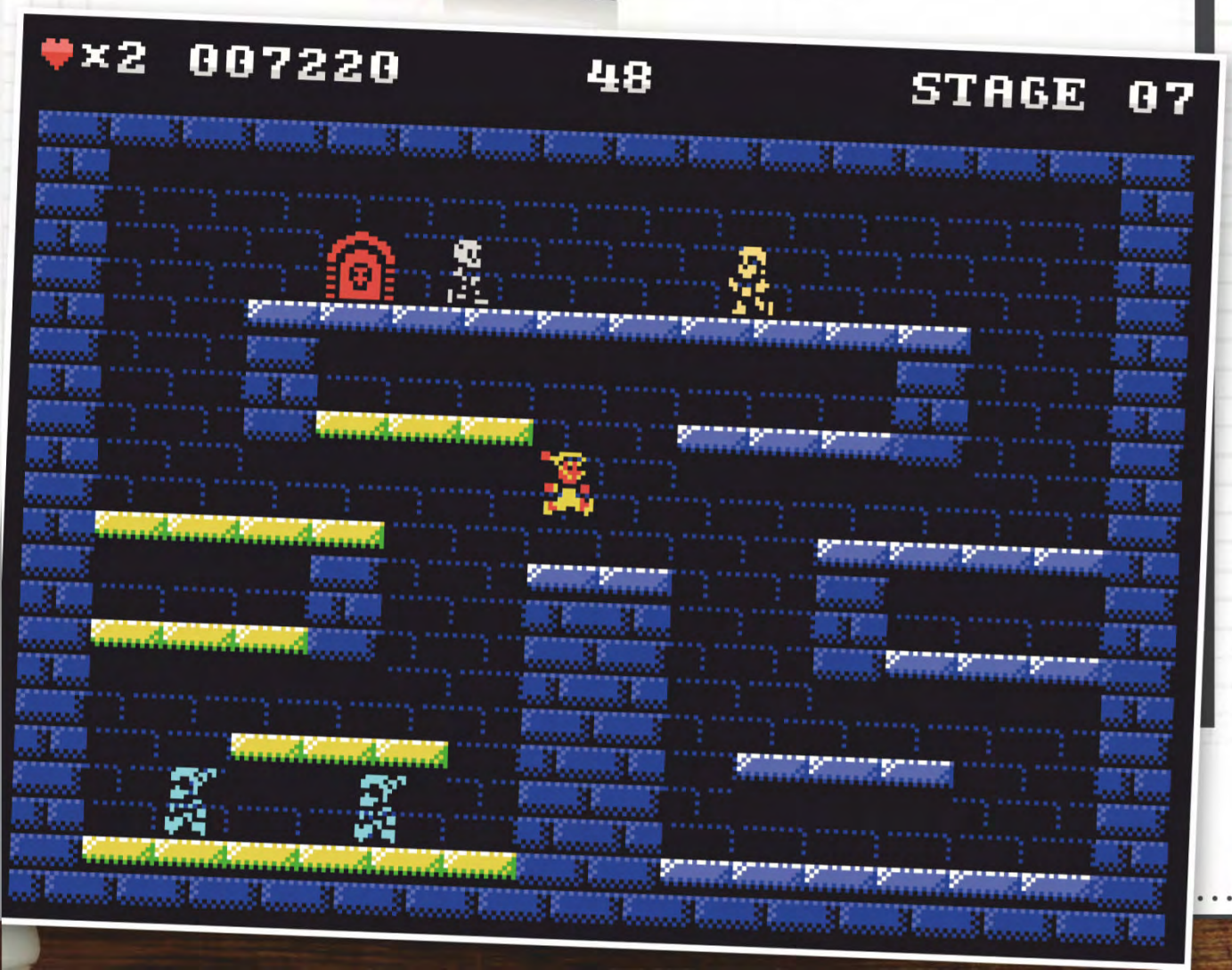
And what would you say were the inspirations for *Night Knight*?
A few years ago, I made a single-screen platformer for the Amstrad CPC called *Magica*, and it had some ideas that I thought were worth exploring a bit more. For the game design I got some inspiration from *Ghosts 'N Goblins*. That's why Sir Bernard, the knight of my game, is dodging deadly monsters wearing his nightshirt and sleep cap.

So roughly how long did it take to develop *Night Knight*, and who was involved in that process?
I made the complete game myself, all in around three months. After that, a group of friends helped me to test it using emulators and different MSX models. The MSX is a well-documented standard and you can find lots of information online, but there are few little differences between models. Because of that, testing with the real hardware is very important.

What has the feedback been like from gamers so far?
The game has been very well received! The core mechanic works nicely and people find it very fun to play. I have been told that I managed to capture the 'classic MSX' game feel, and I think that is a great compliment.

Do you have any plans to port *Night Knight* over to other platforms?
I made this game for the MSX, taking into account the strengths and limitations of the system. My main concern when I think about ports is that different platforms have different capabilities and because of that you may end with a very different game to the original. If you think how easy it is using an emulator to enjoy the original, ports are not that important. But you never know!

And finally, what future projects do you have in store for the MSX?
I would like to release the libraries that I wrote to make *Night Knight*, but that will need some time. Short-term, I'm experimenting with a few game ideas, but it is too early to know if I can make a game from them. Time will tell!

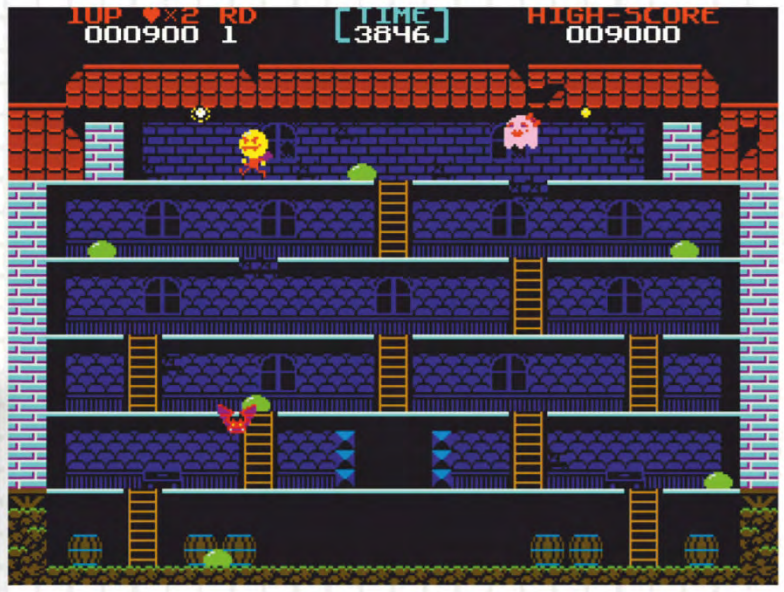


» [Game Boy Color] Going for a climb, bouncing around and bopping baddies along the way.

ONWARDS AND UPWARDS

Time for some cuteness in the form of *Tobu Tobu Girl Deluxe*, where the titular young lady must ascend to the heavens in order to save her cat after an unfortunate mishap with a helium balloon sees the poor feline drifting away.

Chasing without another balloon would be challenging especially against the clock, but there's plenty of airborne critters around which can be used as makeshift platforms. More information on the game, it's history and where to order a cartridge can be found at the Kickstarter page behind Kikstart.me.uk/tobu-gbc.



» [PC] Running away from hostile creatures and nearly done on the first stage.

IN THE DARK

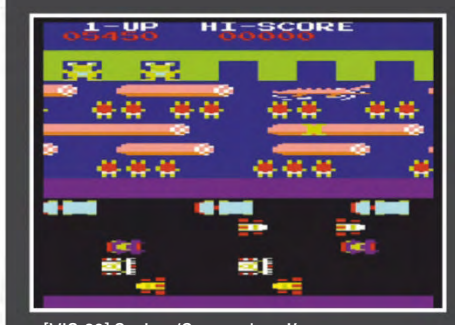
The creatures of the night have, at least according to Darkula, gone a bit soft after opening an amusement park and forgetting who or in most cases what they are. So our antihero decides to 'put things wrong' and his first priority is doing away with all of the artificial lights so that night can return once more.

Designed to resemble classic early Eighties coin-ops like *Bomb Jack* and *Mappy*, *Darkula* is a new action-oriented platform game from developer Locomalito and can be found in the shadows at Kikstart.me.uk/darkula-win.

DO YOU REMEMBER?

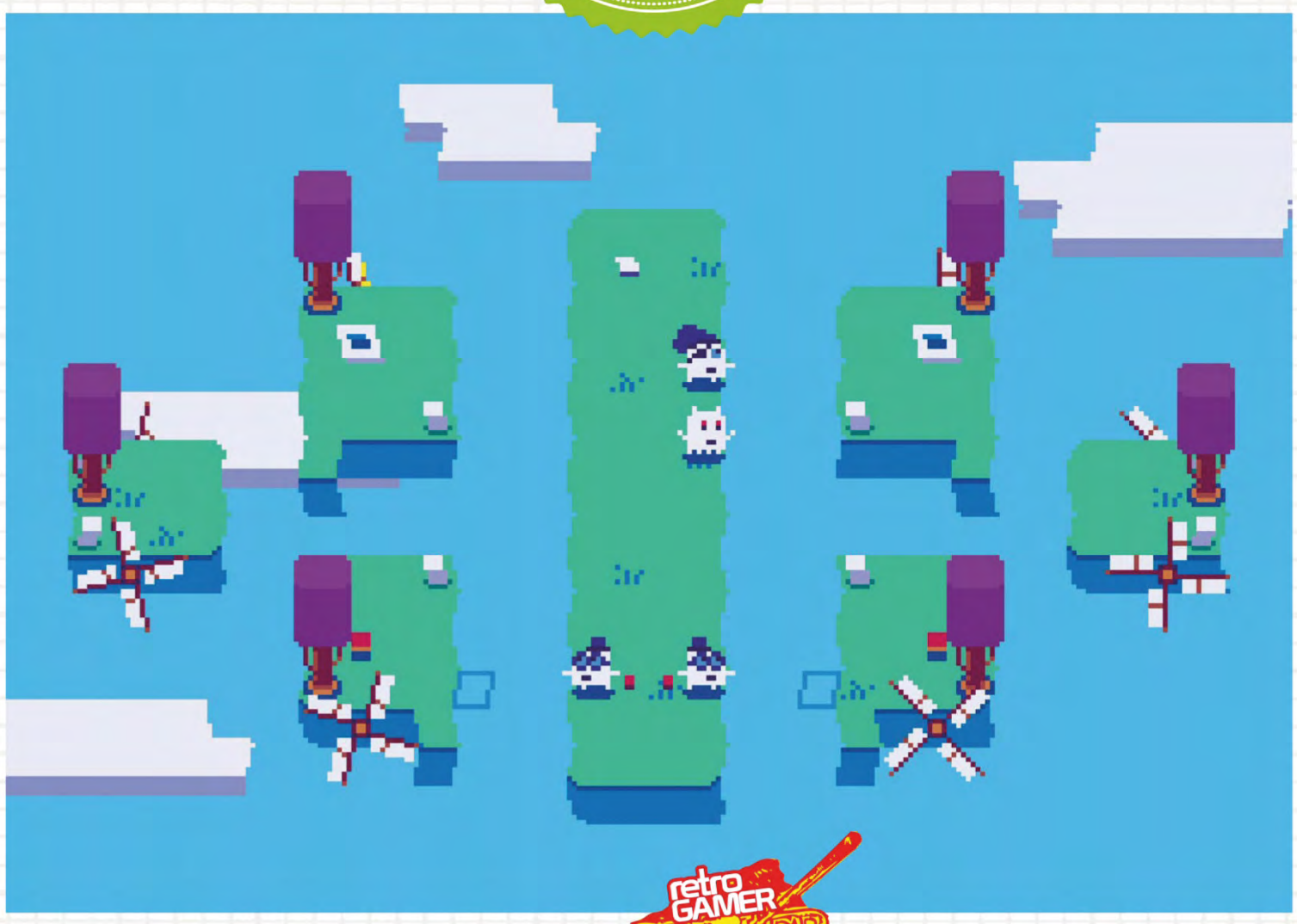
Back in 2007 there wasn't much homebrew support for VIC-20 owners who had larger memory expansions and the majority of releases around that time ran on an unexpanded machine. But then *Frogger '07* unexpectedly hopped onto our keyboards and offered up a technically impressive and playable rendition of the coin-op classic in exchange for a mere 16K of extra RAM.

As with the original, the player takes control of a frog and must guide it home, first traversing a busy motorway and then hopping across the river using passing logs, turtles and occasionally alligators to avoid drowning. Get five frogs to their homes across the bank at the top of the play area and the next, more challenging round starts with extra hazards to avoid during the journey. Kikstart.me.uk/frogger-07-vic will take you there.



» [VIC-20] Saying, 'See you later!' to a passing alligator for absolutely no reason.

» [VIC-20] The Green Cross Code doesn't really work in these circumstances.



MISPLACED

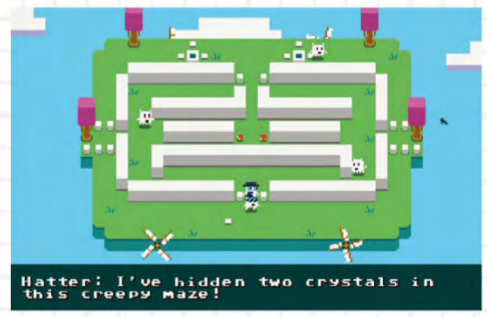
» **PLATFORM:** MEGA DRIVE » **DEVELOPER:** RETROSOULS » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/MISPLACED-MD » **PRICE:** PAY WHAT YOU WANT

Anybody who has come to after a busy night of drinking to find themselves somewhere unexpected with a rotten headache and possibly wearing handcuffs will probably be able to empathise with the predicament that Hara finds himself in every day. Each dawn sees him waking up on a mysterious, worryingly angular, island that's hovering above the clouds in that special way that islands usually don't. Hara isn't alone in these dreamlike environments, either. Along with the occasional patrolling enemy there are potentially friendly folks like Hatter or the pirate who offer useful advice for solving puzzles when asked but also throw in the odd, creepy comment to further the story as well.

Each stage has a quota of items to collect and place into a receptacle and, when all have been positioned, a magical key will appear which transports Hara to the next, more difficult day. Our hero does have a special ability to aid in his quest, however, his magic glasses can pause time and record a few steps of movement which are then stored. These can then be replayed at the press of a button elsewhere on the stage which gives the ability to essentially walk on air between parts of the island. There are limits to this intriguing power, but with a little experimentation it proves a remarkably useful tool.

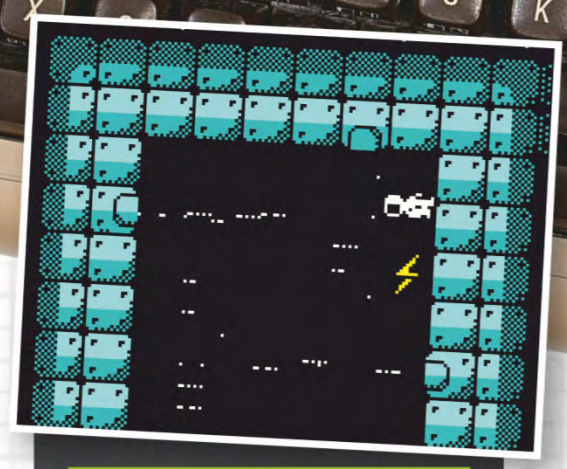
The uncluttered, minimalist art style of *Misplaced* is quite unusual to see for a Mega Drive game, and the small but intricately designed sprites for Hara and his various acquaintances are delightful, as is the jolly music which plays in the background. The game, thankfully, doesn't limit the number of lives – a level can be restarted on a whim by pressing Start – and there's no time limit to worry about, either, but that doesn't mean this is an easy game. Even after grasping the intricacies of the movement-recording ability there's still lots of lateral thinking required to solve the more complicated puzzles, but the entire process of learning and solving each conundrum is enjoyable, as is the feeling of satisfaction after a stage is cleared.

>> Score **91%**



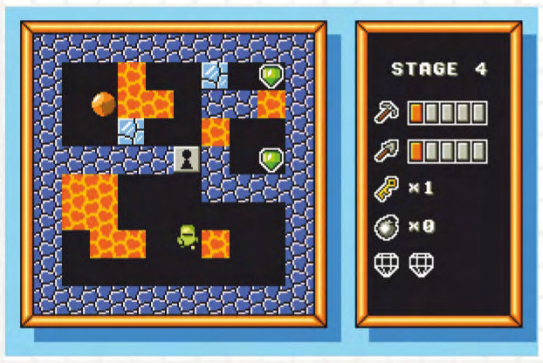
» [Mega Drive] Hatter reckons this maze is both creepy and difficult.

» [Mega Drive] The world of *Misplaced* is often not as it might seem.



PLUTONIUM CAVERNS

» **PLATFORM:** MSDOS8
» **DEVELOPER:** JANI NYKÄNEN » **PRICE:** FREE
» **DL:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/PLUTONIUM-CAVERNS-DOS



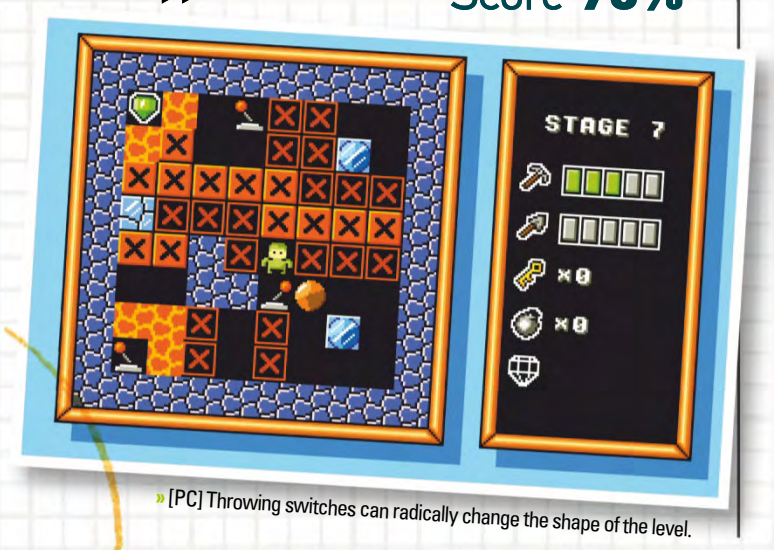
» [PC] The huge lock can be opened with an equally oversized key.

Deep space is a terrible place to run out of fuel, but that's what has happened to one space-faring alien and sheer luck finds him landing on a strange, uncharted world that just happens to be rich in the plutonium crystals needed to get him space-borne once more.

Actually gathering those crystals is easier said than done, however, since they're spread out over a series of puzzle-laden caverns and the alien will need some help with things like digging through rock or pushing boulders into lava to make a safe path.

Plutonium Caverns is a blend of *Chip's Challenge* and *Sokoban* and, while it sadly doesn't come with many levels to work through, the difficulty for the later ones should offer a good challenge. There isn't a penalty for restarting the current stage, either, so players can spend time experimenting to see which route works with the stage's available resources.

>> Score **78%**



» [PC] Throwing switches can radically change the shape of the level.

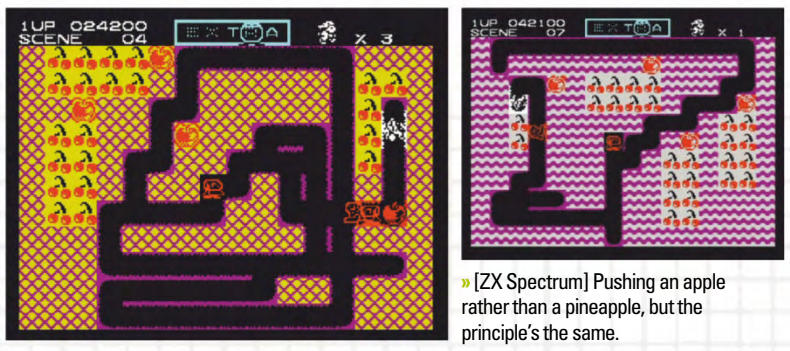
MR DO!

» **PLATFORM:** ZX SPECTRUM » **DEVELOPER:** ADRIAN SINGH
» **PRICE:** FREE » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/MR-DO-SPEC

Gathering cherries is a dangerous pastime in *Mr Do!*'s world, they and other fruits grow underground here and sinister, fast-moving creatures called Creeps patrol the tunnels and attack unsuspecting clowns. The titular protagonist isn't completely helpless however, he can throw a 'power ball' that bounces around and magically returns to him when a nasty has been dealt with – the ball might need retrieving if it gets stuck without hitting something – and there are apples which can be pushed around as a barrier or dropped on the heads of unsuspecting Creeps.

The graphics were drawn by Spectrum legend Mark R Jones so they're great and the sound on 128K machines includes a solid rendition of the original music, but the most important aspect is the gameplay and this is a solid conversion of the Universal coin-op. It's definitely on the tough side, though!

>> Score **88%**



» [ZX Spectrum] Pushing an apple rather than a pineapple, but the principle's the same.

ROUNDUP

Based on the author's own mobile game, *Lost Little Spaceman* on the Spectrum is, possibly unsurprisingly, a game about a little spaceman who has become lost within a maze. There are helpful items to collect but lots of hazards, too, and any movement needs to be planned carefully in order to avoid crashing into something nasty. Find it at Kikstart.me.uk/little-spaceman-spec.

Switching to platforming action and leaping over to Windows-based systems brings us to *Flufy Cleaning Co*, which was inspired by the seminal classic *Jet Set Willy*, more specifically the C64 version because this was the one developer Albatross Wirehead played as a child. The main difference here is that the screens are all generated procedurally and the random seed can be altered for a new set of rooms if so desired. Head over to Kikstart.me.uk/flufy-win for more.

THE COFFEE BREAK SHOOTOUT AND TOTAL REFILL

» **PLATFORM:** COMMODORE 64 » **DEVELOPER:** PSYTRONIK » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/TCBS-REFILL-C64
» **PRICE:** $2.99 DOWNLOAD OR FROM £6.99 (DISK)

Here's a two-for-one deal, a couple of titles bundled together for those times when you fancy a game but only have around half an hour to enjoy it. *Total Refill* is the story of Chris, a barman trying to impress his new boss by single-handedly keeping a small bar of heavy-drinking customers happy. Neglect a patron for too long and they'll get angry, and it only takes one drinker going ballistic to get Chris fired, so keeping him in gainful employment is tricky.

The Coffee Break Shootout hands the player control of a gunsight – either with the joystick or a Commodore 1351 mouse – which is used to target and blast birds flapping across the picturesque landscape. Accuracy is important and, if a shot doesn't land, the bird will say something rude and speed up… but those playing for score may want to encourage that.

>> Score **77%**

» [C64] It's opening time at Knocker's bar but people are already thirsty.

DIFFICULTY

VARIABLE

FORMAT

» **NEO-GEO MVS/AES**

HANDY HINTS

» Some of the items we've featured here may require soldering, depending on your hardware – as always, you should only attempt installation with proper safety precautions and training. If you're not confident, use an installation service.

» Many Neo-Geo accessories were tested only with official carts, and may run into problems with bootlegs – for example, the 161-in-1 cartridge has issues when any memory card is used.

» Don't forget if you plan to load games onto a flash cart, you must own the original version.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

» None

WHERE TO BUY

» **UniBIOS**
unibios.free.fr

» **NeoSD**
terraonion.com

» **NeoSaveMasta**
neogeofanclub.com

HOW TO...

GET THE MOST FROM YOUR NEO-GEO

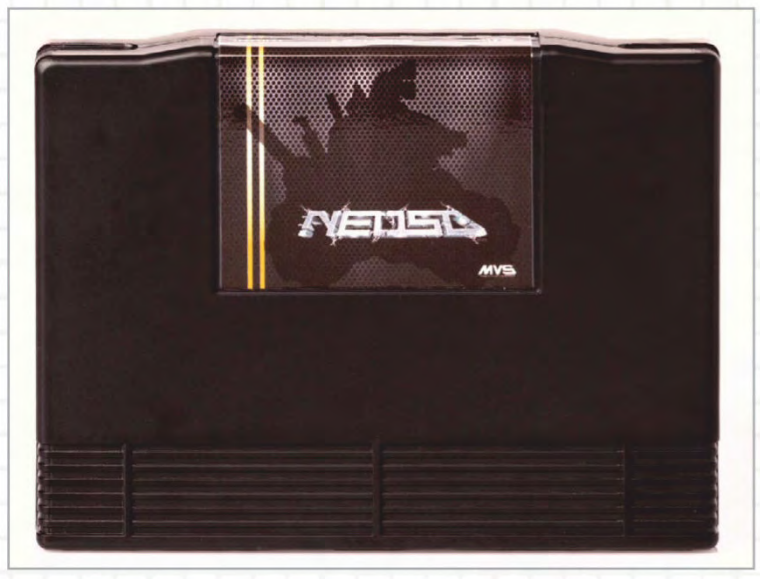
SNK's legendary hardware is pretty user friendly as it's region-free and lacks compatibility issues, but there are still ways to get more out of your machine – whether you own an MVS or AES

01 The Universe BIOS, commonly known as UniBIOS, is a replacement for the standard Neo-Geo BIOS chip found in SNK's Neo-Geo AES and MVS hardware. It's the closest thing to a Game Genie on the system, and much more besides. It grants players the ability to run games in console mode on arcade hardware (thus gaining access to training modes, etc) and vice versa, the ability to run games under your preferred region, a cheat engine, a jukebox and more.

Replacing your original BIOS chip varies in difficulty, depending on the type of hardware you have. Some MVS boards have socketed BIOS chips that are easy to remove and replace – others are soldered onto the PCB. A product called the NeoBiosMasta is available to improve ease of installation on MV1B and MV1C arcade boards. It's a cheap mod, too, costing just €32.

02 Terraonion is fast becoming a famous name in the world of retro gaming accessories, and this is one of its earlier products. As you may have guessed from the name, it's an SD card adapter for the system's cartridge slot that allows you to load games, including homebrew, modified versions and more. If you're familiar with products like the Everdrive range, this is essentially the Neo-Geo equivalent.

The NeoSD gives AES players access to games like *Neo Drift Out* and *Puzzle Bobble* that never got home cartridge releases, and gives MVS players the similar options to the UniBIOS regarding accessing console mode. The NeoSD Pro goes a step further, offering functions like the jukebox too. Be warned, though – Terraonion's products aren't cheap. The NeoSD costs €349 for AES or MVS and the NeoSD Pro will set you back €549



"Memory card readers aren't easy to come by and not all board revisions even include the appropriate connectors to hook them up"

Something you'd like to see a guide for? Contact us at:
RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

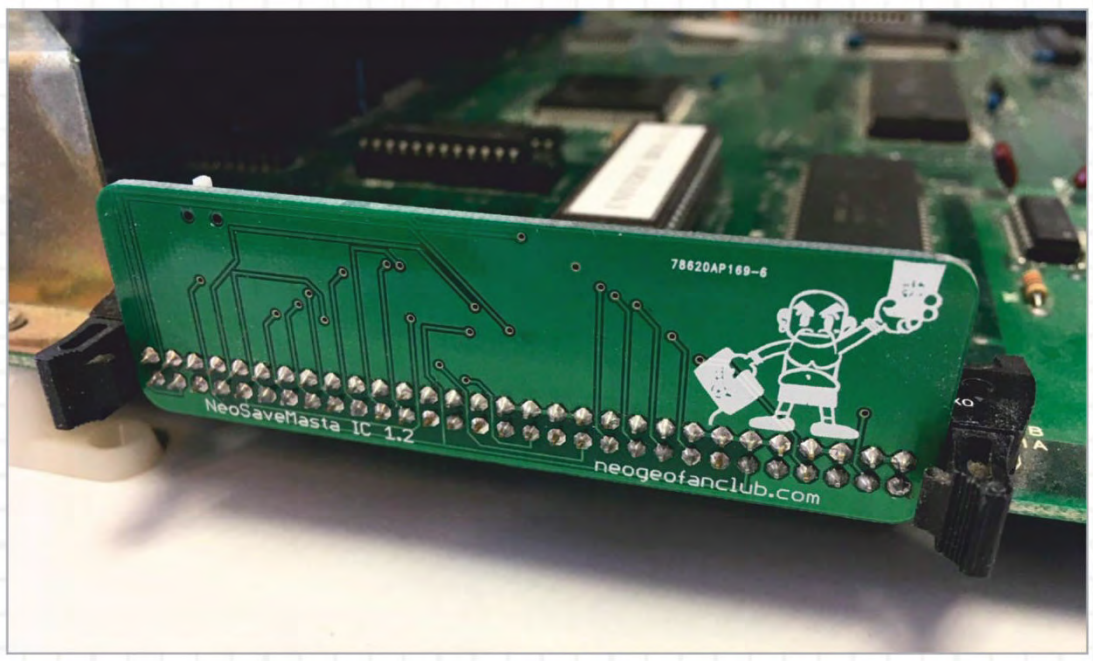
ANY QUESTONS?

Q: I'm an AES owner and want to play some of the MVS-exclusive games without sacrificing original carts, but the NeoSD is pretty expensive. Is there another option?

A: Yes indeed – you could look into cartridge converters, which allow you to plug MVS games into AES consoles. There are a number of different models out there, including the likes of Daedalus, Phantom-1, MagicKey and Fusion, and it's well worth doing a bit of research before buying as some of the older devices introduce glitches. Most of the converters aren't particularly cheap, either, with Fusion being the only one coming in at less than £100.

Q: I don't like the official Neo-Geo controllers much, but nobody seems to be making alternatives. What can I do to get a controller I like?

A: There are a couple of options here. The first is to investigate products like Brook's PlayStation 3/PlayStation 4 To Neo-Geo Super Converter. This device accepts wired PS3 and PS4 controllers, massively increasing the range of choices available to you, and has a few different configuration options available to map the buttons to your liking. We haven't tested this, though, so can't guarantee how well it works. Alternatively, if you're feeling handy, why not try making your own controller? Pinout diagrams are available online and the Neo-Geo standard is very simple, utilising one wire per button.



03 The Neo-Geo was the first home console to offer removable memory cards, and these could be used to transfer progress from the arcade. Unfortunately, original Neo-Geo memory cards aren't too reliable these days. It's worse if you own an MVS board, as memory card readers aren't easy to come by and not all board revisions even include the appropriate connectors to hook them up. Fortunately, NeoTurfMasta offers a range of replacement devices for any Neo-Geo owner.

The $48 NeoSaveMasta is a compatible memory card built with modern technology, which will please AES owners. The NeoSaveMasta IC-VMC is a virtual memory card that plugs into the appropriate slot on MVS boards that support memory card readers, and costs $35. If your board doesn't, the NeoBiosMasta VMC costs $45 and may well solve the problem.

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED...

A selection of smaller questions from readers...

TAKE CHARGE

Can I keep a Nintendo 3DS mint in box for collection purposes? Or do I need to charge it every few years to protect the battery?
Piper2381 via Twitter

If you want to extend the life of the battery, then you're going to need to charge it every so often – experts say that lithium ion batteries should be kept at around 40 per cent charge to improve their lifespan, so it'd likely be a good idea to charge it more frequently than you have suggested. Heat is a major cause of battery degradation, so if possible you should keep the system in a cool, dry place. This advice is applicable to a variety of devices. The 3DS uses a rechargeable lithium ion battery, much like the Game Boy Advance SP and Game Boy Micro, the original DS, the Switch and the Wii U controller. The PSP and Vita also use lithium ion batteries, as do laptops and smartphones.

MUSIC MYSTERY

Why is it that when I put my PlayStation *Ridge Racer* disc in my CD player, I can listen to the music, but it doesn't work for other games like *Final Fantasy VII*?
Terry Fisher via email

This one comes down to the way the music is stored. The PlayStation can play standard CD audio during gameplay, as it does in games like *Ridge Racer*, but it also has a couple of other options. Other games store pre-recorded music as files to be played back, often as files with the extension .XA, while others still use the PlayStation's sound chip to generate their audio.

LOST WORLD

Do you think *Dinosaur Planet* would have been better or worse if it didn't get merged with *Star Fox*?
Lea-Lea via Twitter

It's hard to know how to answer this, as we never played *Dinosaur Planet* in its original incarnation. Unless someone at Rare feels like inviting us up for a go on some old prototypes (and if you do, *please* give us a ring – we'd be in Twycross faster than you can say '*It's Mr Pants*'), all we can do is speculate. We'd guess that apart from the space combat bits thrown in to make it feel more *Star Fox*-y, the design probably didn't change a great deal, which means it comes down to the characters. And let's be clear – *Grand Theft Auto V* would be just as good if, instead of being about criminals who steal cars and shoot drug dealers, it was about fairies who borrow unicorns and zap goblins. It probably wouldn't sell nearly as well, but the game design would be just as solid.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**

"I think this keyboard was built with a built-in beating detector. As soon as you start thrashing it, it instantly turns off, and the harder you thrash it, the longer it stays off."

JOHN ROMERO'S BROKEN KEYBOARD

"Donated to me by John and Brenda, to whom I'm very grateful."

PAID: €0

JAZZ JACKRABBIT: THE SECRET FILES BALLOON

"They were used during the *Jazz Jackrabbit: The Secret Files* release party. After the release some balloons were left over and stored. Years later I met the CEO of Project Interactive who donated some *Jazz Jackrabbit* stuff, including these."

PAID: €0

BIO

NAME:
Anne Bras

FAVOURITE GAME:
The Secret Of Monkey Island

FAVOURITE CONSOLE:
NES

LOCATION:
Zaandam, Netherlands

ESTIMATED VALUE:
€40,000

TWITTER:
@hangman3d

OUT OF THE BOX

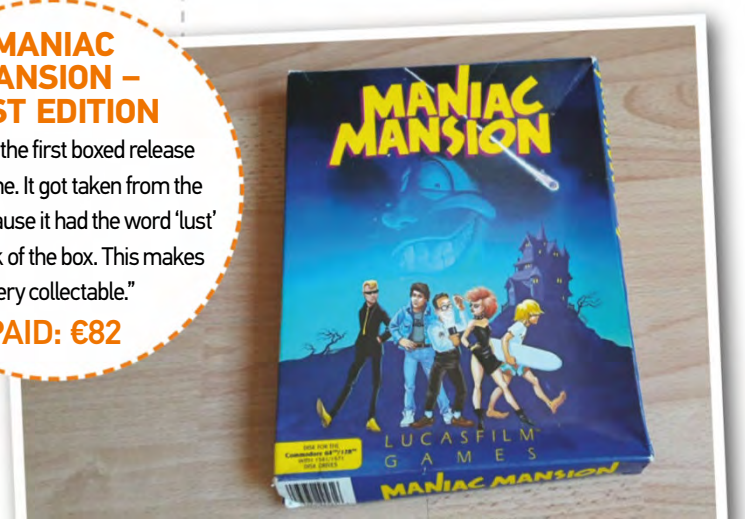
Anne Bras has a penchant for the collecting boxed PC games

This month we have another record holder in Collector's Corner, Anne Bras aka the PC King, from Zaandam, Holland. We'll get to the record shortly – in the meantime, how did Anne begin to collect for the PC? "The first PC game I bought was *Day Of The Tentacle* at a market," he begins. "It was only €2.50! Of course, I wasn't aware how much it would be worth in the future, but because we already lived in the era of games in DVD boxes, I started to realise how beautiful these big PC game boxes really are. From this moment, I was a boxed PC games collector."

Having acquired a collection of around 600 games from a friend in the Netherlands, Anne realised that he was now the owner of the largest collection of PC games in his home country. "It then crossed my mind that I might actually have the largest collection in the world! I knew a lot of other great collectors, but had a feeling my amount was above theirs. So that's when I decided to go for the world record." That was the easy part; with just over 2,000 games in his collection, the process of applying for the record would prove a little painful. "They obviously needed picture as proof," says Anne, "and, of course, an empty game box doesn't count. I had to take out a game, open it up, unless sealed, display everything nicely for a picture, take the picture, put everything back and then get the next game." This process took Anne five years before the next hurdles appeared. "There was an official counting where a notary, main witness and two friends counted and checked all the games; then there was some paperwork and after a couple of bumps I was able to send it all off to the Guinness World Records."

In addition to the mass of games in his collection, Anne also owns several iconic gaming items, including…a broken keyboard? "One day John Romero lost a game of *Quake* against Ronan Pearce," he smiles. "The keyboard started to malfunction due to repeated beatings from John, and he said, 'I think this keyboard was built with a built-in beating detector. As soon as you start thrashing it, it instantly turns off, and the harder you thrash it, the longer it stays off.' Both John and Brenda were very kind, and shipped the keyboard to me. It is signed by both John Romero and Ronan Pearce." Anne also owns a very rare copy of '*Duke Nukum*', an alternative name for *Duke Nukem* before Apogee realised the name wasn't copyrighted after all.

But Anne's Jewel In The Crown is his certificate, received three months after the submission of his collection. But for him, the adventure doesn't stop there. "There are still so many games missing from my collection. I actually have a passion for preserving gaming history and sharing it with the world, so I'm very grateful for all the people that have donated their games." To that end, all of Anne's collection is available for viewing at the Games & Computers museum in Zwolle, Netherlands, which sounds like a perfect afternoon out to us.



MANIAC MANSION – LUST EDITION

"Basically the first boxed release of that game. It got taken from the shelves because it had the word 'lust' on the back of the box. This makes it very collectable."

PAID: €82

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

FALLOUT 3 BEER

"There were actually quite a lot, but because it was a big party and, because drinking beer is fun, these beer bottles became very rare very quickly. Donated by the publisher."

PAID: €0

GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS
CERTIFICATE
The largest collection of boxed PC games is 1832 items, achieved by Anne Bras (Netherlands) in Zwolle, Netherlands, as verified on 17 June 2017.
OFFICIALLY AMAZING

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

GUINNESS BOOK OF RECORDS CERTIFICATE

■ "Since I'm now a Guinness World Record Holder, [my Jewel In The Crown] should probably be my official certificate, which I feel portrays my passion for collecting and preserving these games. Setting the record was an awesome adventure."

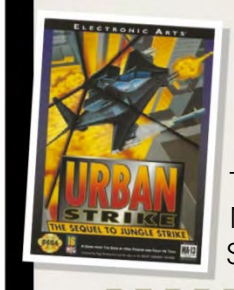
PAID: €30

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

THE COVER STAR SHENMUE

Many quality Dreamcast games go for silly money, so it's a bit of a surprise to note that this fantastic game can still be obtained relatively cheaply. Maybe that shouldn't be a shock given that the game is not exactly rare, but sometimes the retro market can be very strange. Nevertheless, expect to pay no more than **£30**, even for a mint complete boxed copy of this masterpiece.



URBAN STRIKE

This third game in the legendary *Strike* series was a huge hit back in the Nineties and can still be picked up for around **£10-£15** boxed on the Sega Mega Drive with SNES boxed prices following around **£10** more.

ETERNAL DARKNESS

A few years ago this popular GameCube horror game could be picked up for a mere fiver at CeX. Today it will set you back **£18** at the High Street retailer, with Buy It Now options around **£20-£24** posted on eBay. It's still well worth every penny.

SUPER STAR WARS

Another huge seller reflected in moderate prices, despite the notoriously flimsy SNES cardboard packaging. **£15** will get you a good condition boxed copy, and **£5** will net you a loose cart.

HIGHLANDER (AMSTRAD)

One game that was most definitely not a huge seller was this movie licence flop from Ocean Software, and few copies surface on the internet. When they do, they command a very high price (often **£50** plus) for such a poor game.

HOW MUCH?!

LEGEND OF ZELDA TWILIGHT PRINCESS E3 2005 DS DEMO PRESS CARTRIDGE

There was a nice story on eBay recently when a former member of the games industry sold this exclusive demo cart from E3 2005. Despite just containing a video clip rather than the game itself, the item sold for **£250**.

Prices correct at time of print

MAILBAG

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WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a spanking copy of either our NES/Master System or SNES/Mega Drive books

STAR LETTER

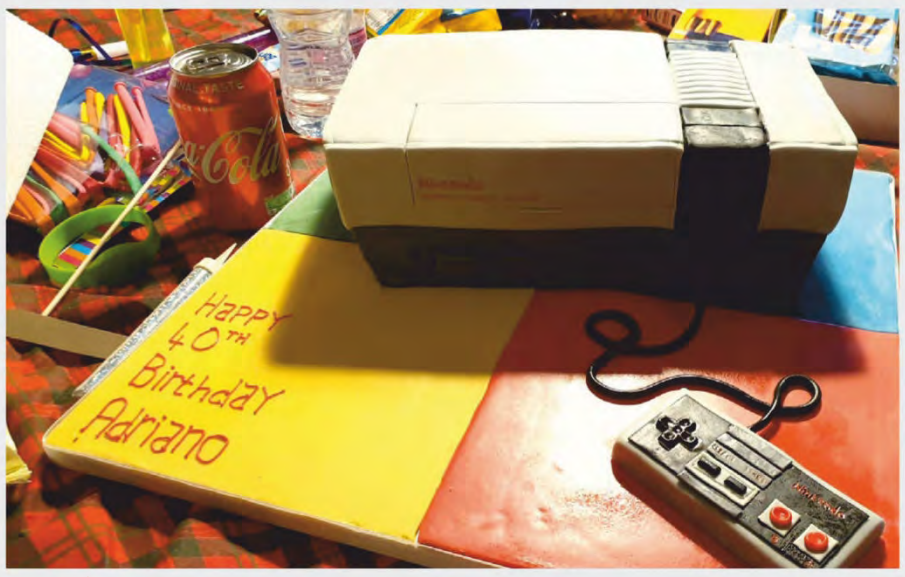
CAKE THAT

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I was fortunate enough to celebrate my 40th birthday recently. To my utter surprise, my wonderful wife produced this magnificent birthday cake: a life-size replica of my very first console, the NES, for me to enjoy. It is still to this day my favourite retro platform, albeit playing it via the Switch. If only Nintendo would make my number one pick, *Faxanadu*, available…

Anyway, my cake and I are off to start my mid-life crisis with some retro reading and reminiscing.
Cheers,
Adriano

PS: If a plug is permitted, the talented cake maker who produced this is Lynsey from Custom Cakes (customcakes.biz) based in Ayr, Scotland.

That is a pretty fantastic cake, Adriano! As gaming-related food goes, it definitely looks way more appetising than the blue Sonic curry or anything from Capcom's *Resident Evil* café. The only problem is that you don't appear to have any cartridges to go with it – may we suggest *Icing Hockey*? But seriously, many happy returns, and you've got the option of a little more NES love if you choose that bookazine as a prize. You might even see *Faxanadu* in it!



» This NES can have more than 8 bits, with careful slicing.

» [NES] Adriano likes *Faxanadu*, and he's in good company – readers voted it 16th in issue 139's top 25 NES games.

32XCESS

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
With the amount of money anything even vaguely shooter-like on the 32X is going for on eBay, isn't it about time that proper developers got on board and started making games for it?

Just imagine – all the ports that were on underpowered home computers or had poor colour on the Mega Drive. What would they be like on the 32X?

All the Amiga games that only had 32 colours, poor framerates and one button could be ported to the 32X. No loading times killing the momentum, you could play on a CRT in proper 240p RGB as intended without any lag, on a gorgeous six-button Mega Drive pad.

Wouldn't the 32X be the dream console for retro gamers, if only there were any games actually released for it?

Just imagine the furore online if Capcom released a load of CPS games on the 32X. Konami, *Simpsons Arcade*? *Thunder Cross*? Taito, *Bubble Bobble*? Am I living in dream land? What do you think?
Tom Wedley

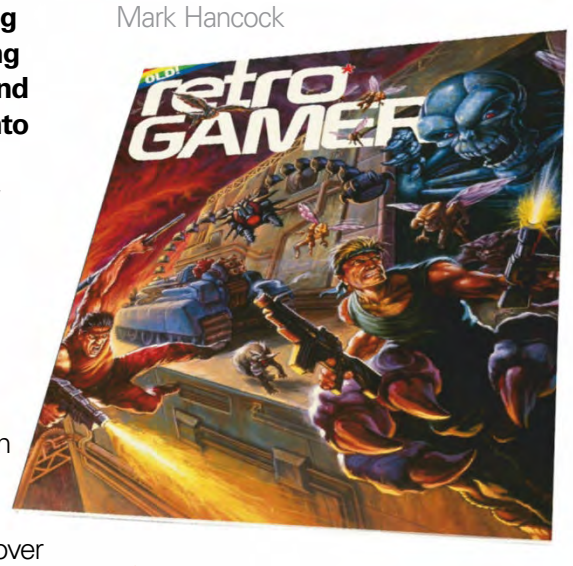
» Could the 32X really become the hottest thing in retro games? Tom Wedley seems to think so.

While we agree that the 32X is likely capable of hosting some superb arcade conversions if given the proper time and attention, we find it hard to imagine any official effort going towards making them. There isn't a huge existing market of 32X owners out there to sell games to right now, and even if a bunch of brilliant and affordable cartridges suddenly came along to make people consider buying the system, demand would send the price of the system right into the stratosphere. We wouldn't be surprised to see homebrew coders try some of these conversions, though.

COVER BOTHER

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I might be in the minority, in fact I may even be the only one, but I'm not a fan at all of the subscriber covers. My main issue is that nowhere does it tell you on the cover what the actual content of that issue is. How will I know in months or years to come what is contained within that issue, other than the obvious which can be worked out from the image on the cover. I enjoy flicking through my old issues from time to time and I will open them and re-read articles based on what it says on the cover? You see my point? They just look bland and uninteresting and I'm not a fan of most of the type of artwork that you use these days anyway. I prefer the old Oliver Frey type of artwork. I can't remember the last time I looked at one and was blown away.

I know on at least one occasion you printed both the subscriber cover and the regular retail cover on the front and back of the magazine. Would you consider doing this again or maybe just scrap the subscriber cover. Surely it would be more cost effective to just produce the one cover? Other than this I enjoy the magazine, I'd like more bias towards 8-bit coverage but that's just my age. Keep up the good work but please scrap the subscriber covers.
Mark Hancock



» Some readers aren't thrilled with our subscriber covers, but the overall response has been broadly positive.

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Hi Mark, sorry to hear that you're not a fan of the subscriber covers. However, we have no plan to stop doing them. We've been doing subscriber covers for over a year and a half now, and while you're not the only person to express a distaste for them, overall feedback has been broadly positive and we have more subscribers than ever. If you want to know what's in an issue without looking at the contents pages, we'd suggest visiting the Retro Gamer section of parkproductions.co.uk, which features a useful content listing for each issue.

For what it's worth, it's a misconception that we've ever printed the retail cover on the back page of the subscriber issue – the back cover is usually an advert. With issue 187, that was a third cover for a special 'flipper' design.

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

I'm a subscriber and a massive fan of **Retro Gamer** magazine and I'm always itching for the next copy to be delivered through my door.

Recently I bought some back catalogues of **RG** online and picked up Issue ten, which I believe was from around 2005 (14 years ago!). Reading it was very interesting – there was the Retro Mart section with public adverts, such as someone looking for an old VHS taped episode of *GamesMaster* from 1995 and a 28-inch Sonic figure for sale. A cover disk with 'Game Factory' on it, accompanied by a guide to making your very own breakout clone (stick to the calendars and the stickers!). An advert full of promises such as Mega Drive games from a £1 (you won't get those prices in CeX) and an opportunity to buy polyphonic ring tones for your brand-new Nokia.

Give me back exclusive subscriber magazine covers, Collectors Corner, Mailbag and How Tos any day! I loved the nostalgic journey through **Retro Gamer** 2005 but I was glad to get back to the current format – I was glad to get back to the future!

Keep up the good work, team!

Kelvin Dimmock

It's even older than you think, Kelvin – that issue came out on 23 November 2004! We're pleased to know that you like the direction the magazine has gone in, but we'll always be grateful for the work Martyn Carroll and the original Live Publishing team put in – without them, we wouldn't be here today.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Excursions

Getting the whole team together this month has been tricky, as we've been exploring. Darran took his family out to Disneyland Paris, Drew went to Glastonbury and was thrilled with Foals' secret set, while Nick has been performing interviews and shopping at Japan Expo in Paris and Hyper Japan in London.

» When issue 10 launched, Darran was still working on *games™*, Nick was studying his A Levels and Drew was in middle school and just turned 13!

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

Shenmue – love it or loathe it?

» [Dreamcast] *Shenmue* fans are out there, and boy are they legion.

Dean Puckering

Shenmue was one of the very first games (along with *Final Fantasy VII*) that I got utterly obsessed with to the point where it took over my life. I cried at E3 2015 when *Shenmue III* was announced. And you can print that. I don't care who knows. I'm so excited for it.

Romain Mahut

Shenmue allowed the 15-year-old boy that I was back in 2000 to travel to Japan for the first time without having to get out of my bedroom. As far as immersion is concerned, no game could touch *Shenmue* back then and very few games come close now.

William Bargery

I love the pace of the original *Shenmue*. It felt like a real living world at the time and was a joy to explore!

Emmet Purcell

Shenmue is still fascinating to play 20 years later because it's the road not taken for open world adventure games. Rather than the title's bespoke dialogue and dense environments, we ended up with copy-and-paste NPCs and unmemorable maps. Only *Yakuza* picked up its mantle.

Steven Leicester

Never played them when they first came out, and having played the remasters I can't see what all the fuss is about. Having to wait around for specific times for things to happen in game may be realistic, but it doesn't make for a compelling experience. Downright bored at times. Don't even get me started on how tedious the forklift truck sections are.

Kenny Haslam

Favourite game of all time. Completely changed the face of gaming and feel it's often overlooked these days in light of *Grand Theft Auto* etc. I'll never forget the first time I had to find those pesky sailors!

Simone Caronno

The *Shenmue* games are beautifully boring. There's a charm in having nothing else to do than wandering around.

HM

Shenmue… It became an instant obsession! It changed my life; as a 17-year-old Norwegian it had me go to boarding school in Hong Kong, resulting in a BA in Chinese.

retro GAMER

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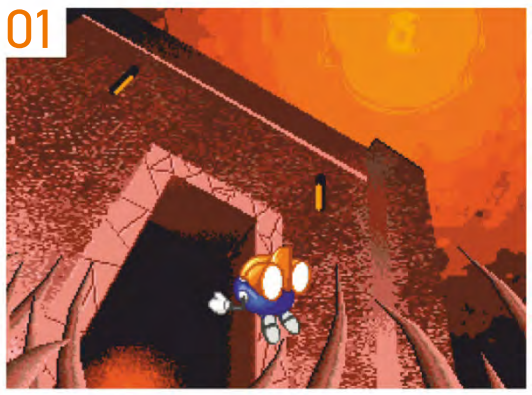
ENDGAME

GUNBEE F99

What do you do when you've got a skill, but can't quite be bothered to do the full creative job? Well, that's obvious – you piggyback off someone else's work. Join a cover band, write some fan fiction, or if you're like the developers of *Gunbee F99*, 'pay extensive tribute' to a beloved shoot-'em-up. Thankfully, they did at least seem to do an original ending sequence, so let's look at that...

01



» Gunbee, piloted by Kiara McGuire, approaches the lair of the evil Khenmir. He's a bad dude who has kidnapped Lady Akiko, princess of Valstyx. It's a scary-looking place, but those spikes are actually made of papier-mâché.

02

» The door is locked, but thanks to some cowboy builders Gunbee can just kick right through it, like some beardy ginger bloke whose housemate got locked in the bathroom. [Who might that be, Nick? - Ed]

03

» Khenmir stands ready to meet the challenge, looking all mean. Lady Akiko sobs in the background for some reason, despite the fact that her captor has done a shoddy job of chaining her up. Is anybody competent round here?

04

» Twin – sorry, Gunbee solves the problem by walloping Khenmir over the head with a gigantic plank of wood. 'Hacksaw' Jim Duggan picks up the phone to complain that he's suffering from gimmick infringement and to see him in court, but he sadly fails to get the case to trial as he just happens to use the same law firm as Konami.

05

» Still, Lady Akiko is happy. The magic crystals have been restored, Valstyx is saved, and someone has given her an Amiga-themed gift. Unfortunately, it's from Khenmir and is bugged, setting up a future kidnap attempt. Fortunately, like everything else here, it's counterfeit and doesn't work, so there will be no sequel.

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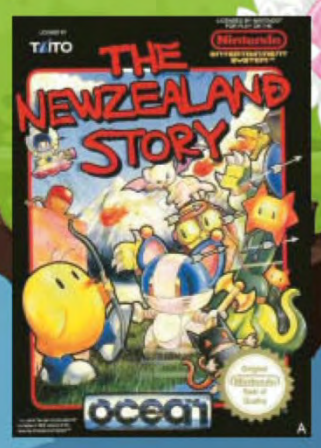

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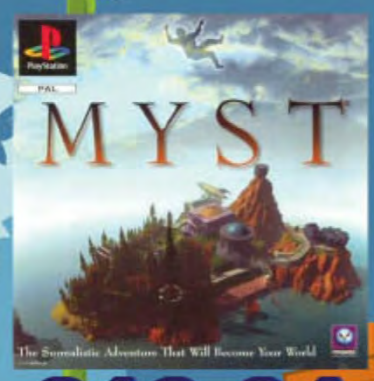

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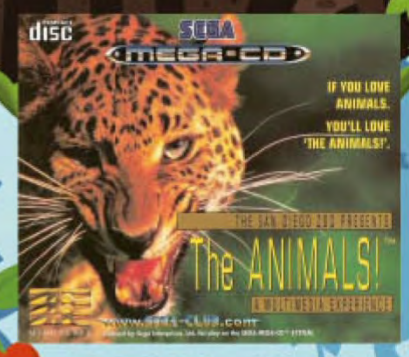

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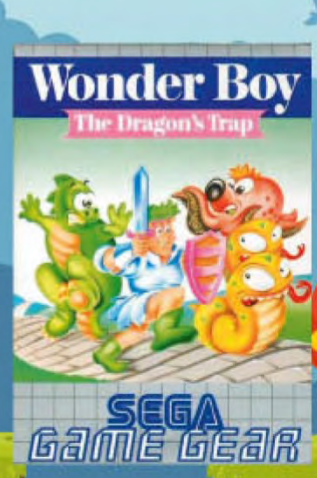

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